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ABSTRACT

This book presents an eighth grade science teacher's diary. For 36 weeks during the 1998-99 school year, this middle school teacher explored her teaching life on the World Wide Web. Each week, hundreds of visitors to MiddleWeb followed the ups and downs of her professional journey, experiencing her enthusiasm at the opening of school, watching as she raised difficult issues before her Critical Friends Group and as she questioned the effectiveness of her own teaching, sharing her grief and puzzlement over the Columbine tragedy, and following her as the school year drew to a close. (SM)



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# *Teaching*

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# *Teaching Out Loud*
## *A Middle Grades Diary*

*from MiddleWeb*

*by*
*Deborah Bambino*

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NMSA

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## *Dedication*

...to my children, Michael, Jamie, Ben and Becca, who introduced me to the wonder of diverse learning styles and distinct personalities.

...to my students, who make it all worthwhile.

...and to my husband, Clay, who encouraged me to pursue a life as a teacher and continues to support me in my efforts to "polish the stone" of my craft.



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## *Acknowledgements*

While a diary is written by a single individual, a host of persons played key roles in the events and ideas described here. They deserve recognition and my thanks.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform and my close association with three of the institute's Philadelphia coaches - Gina Kaplan, Carol Nejman, and Wendy Shapiro - first introduced me to the power of simply reflecting upon my work and making that process public. It is to these three that I turn when I need a push in my thinking or a much needed laugh along the way.

John Norton of MiddleWeb, first made the call for teacher diaries and has been my audience and editor through each step of this process. Without John, I'd probably still be just thinking about keeping a diary.

It is hard to imagine managing this entire process of reflection and writing without the support of Diane Melley and the project team of the IBM Reinventing Education Grant. Just a few short years ago, I was vaguely aware of the power of technology for my students BUT had no idea about its ability to support my development as a teacher. Through IBM's partnership with the school district a vision for "Continuous Practice Improvement" has evolved and has been proven invaluable for me as a teacher and by extension for my students. The generosity of IBM has given us access to the broader world of information, teachers, and students.

As an adopter of my school, the staff at Johns Hopkins, particularly Allen Ruby, have been helpful in presenting me with contacts and opportunities to enrich my classroom's store of science information and materials.

Carolyn Minor, my personal unofficial mentor, has been a friend, a neighbor, and a colleague who is always ready to support my efforts as a science teacher and a parent. Without her leadership, many of the resources my students value would be unavailable to them. She not only says, "Go for it!" she always has an idea or connection which empowers my teaching. Carolyn gets the "stuff" of teaching into the hands of my students.

Finally, I'd like to thank my students and their parents, my colleagues, especially my Critical Friends, and the staff at Central East Middle School.

Without them, my work would not be possible. I have learned so much through this diary project - most notably, how much more I have to learn. Thank you — DB

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# *Foreword*

A wirebound notebook juts from beneath a pile of books and student assignments on the teacher's desk. Scrawled across the cover in the teacher's hurried script is a single word - *Diary*. The urge to peek is almost irresistible.

Why resist?

Thanks to Deborah Bambino, an eighth grade science teacher/leader at Philadelphia's Central East Middle School, we can satisfy our curiosity - guilt-free. For 36 weeks during the 1998-99 school year, Deb explored her teaching life in the most public way possible - on the World Wide Web. Each week, hundreds of visitors to MiddleWeb followed the ups and downs of her professional journey - experiencing her enthusiasm at the opening of school, eavesdropping as she raised difficult issues before her Critical Friends Group, empathizing as she questioned the effectiveness of her own teaching, sharing her grief and puzzlement over the Columbine tragedy, and admiring her spirit and tenacity as the school year drew to a close:

> *I don't really feel like the year is ending...my mind is already racing toward the fall and the new school year. For me summer is almost like downshifting. I'm not pulling over to rest, and I can already see that next big mountain straight ahead. But I'm slowing down a bit and enjoying the scenery before the next ascent.*

When we began the teacher diary project at MiddleWeb, we put out a call for teachers "who are engaged in a significant effort to 'rachet up' their teaching." (Some folks wanted to know what 'rachet up' meant. If you've ever changed a tire, you know.) The weekly diary, we said, "will trace the evolution of the effort, reporting on the progress, the problems, the mid-air adjustments, the lessons learned. Storytelling will be an important element."

As is so often the case when teachers are involved, we got more than we bargained for. Because we are a website with a strong commitment to middle grades reform, we wanted descriptions of reform in action. Deborah and fellow diarist Susan Smethurst provided something much richer - authentic accounts of daily school life in the midst of change.

Susan's school in inner-city Toronto has often been marked by a sense of disillusionment and powerlessness. Her determination in the face of this sometimes "toxic" atmosphere infuses Susan's journal entries with a special power and poignancy. (You can read her diary at http://www.middleweb.com/MSDiaries.html.)

Deb has a different story to tell. Her inner-city school in the Feltonville section of Philadelphia could be a "poster child" for middle grades reform. Throughout her diaries, you will find references to the National School Reform Faculty, the Annenberg Institute, IBM's "Reinventing Education" project, the Johns Hopkins' Talent Development program, and other cutting-edge school improvement strategies. Change and stress are constants in Deb's closely watched school:

> *STRESS! As a middle school teacher I used to say things like 'hormones are my life' and joke about the ups and downs of normal adolescent mood swings, but now I'm definitely changing my motto to 'interruptions are my life!'*

*After a mere twelve days of class, we are hosting a gala visit on Monday with international guests from South Africa, Viet Nam, and Australia. Since the delegation is so impressive, the mayor and school superintendent are coming too.*

When I once wrote (with a bit too much military flourish) that the MiddleWeb diaries would provide "teacher dispatches from the frontlines of change," I had a school like Central East in mind. Deborah Bambino has proved to be a five-star field correspondent.

Deb has a scientist's mind and a teacher's heart. Her candid, unadorned prose dissects the challenges confronting every middle school committed to excellence for all. In entry after entry we see Deb soaking up information from research and professional development experiences, then applying her new knowledge and insight through what might be described as "clinical trials" among her students and teacher colleagues. And she's not afraid to put her work to the test. Here's an excerpt from April 12th, describing her presentation at an Annenberg teacher conference:

*On Saturday, I presented a videotape of one of my 8th grade sections exploring the convection of warm and cool air masses. We spent a three-hour block of time watching the tape and discussing the lesson and students' grasp of the materials as seen through their lab sketches and test answers.*

*After the group watched the film they shared their observations of my teaching goals and the mutually respectful tone of my classroom. As I listened to their feedback, I was pleased by their recognition of many of the strengths of the lesson. But I was bothered by the nagging question: 'If everything's so wonderful, why aren't the kids learning more?'*

If you have a highlighter handy, please swipe it over that last phrase, so everyone who picks up this book will read it. If everything's so wonderful, why aren't the kids learning more? How easy it is to lose sight of the kids in the rush to implement "reform." Deborah manages to keep her eye on the prize, and her unwillingness to settle for the trappings of school improvement provides the sturdy moral center of the diary entries collected in this book.

Deb believes that the very process of journal writing - of "teaching out loud," as she neatly puts it in her self-selected title - has kept her teaching and her professionalism alert and alive. In her last diary entry, she tells us that:

> *I've really enjoyed writing this diary. The schedule has forced me to reflect weekly and has led me to ask questions that I might have otherwise overlooked - questions primarily of myself, but also of my students and my peers.*
>
> *Despite my initial feelings, which were a bit panicky, writing my thoughts down helped me to regain my perspective. Writing and then sharing what I'd written placed the children back at the center, where they belong.*

I know that Deb would encourage every teacher and principal hungry to improve to consider the power of reflective journal writing. It can be a private affair, part of a critical friends group activity, or something as public as a World Wide Web page. Imagine the insights we might harvest if more educators publicly chronicled their search for professional excellence in the service of kids.

> *I had a boy who was absent call me at home to discuss his science fair problem. He asked the most thoughtful questions. I could tell he'd been really thinking about it. I don't think he can possibly know how good it made me feel to have a student*

*show me so clearly that he cared about the work. It was also very nice to give him my undivided attention.*

*The boy, I'll call him Steve, is thoughtful, but a little slow in his processing. I can't ever seem to stop long enough to really answer his questions in class when there are at least 32 others needing a piece of me. I guess this was just a glimpse of what smaller class size would be like. Kids getting feedback quickly and fully and teachers feeling like, hey, I'm really getting through to them.*

Deb would also want me to say that she's nothing special. Her work with the Annenberg Challenge and similar initiatives brings her into contact with thousands of other educators who are looking for answers to student failure. Not the easy answers - "It's the kids." "It's the parents." - but the hard answers, the solutions we can only find when we look inside ourselves.

MiddleWeb will continue to post diaries by thoughtful teachers like Deborah Bambino and Susan Smethurst. Beginning in the fall of 1999, we'll add principals to the mix. And we have other diary surprises in store. Who knows? One day we might convince a superintendent to put pen to paper, virtually speaking. Wouldn't that be something?

Meanwhile, enjoy and learn from the reflections of Deborah Bambino. And if you become sufficiently engaged, join us at MiddleWeb for Deb's continuing journal entries. She's got a new principal, a new teaching assignment, and a new curriculum. It should be an interesting year.

— John Norton, Editor, MiddleWeb

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*MiddleWeb (www.middleweb.com) is supported by a grant from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's Program for Student Achievement.*

## *Introduction*

***Meet this teacher/author whose hunger to improve is supported by colleagues who are also ready to look at hard questions and develop new initiatives.***

Teaching is a second career for me. I worked at many jobs in restaurants, factories, and in a hospital before returning to school to pursue a teaching certificate. I did this at my husband's urging because, he said, I spent all my free time volunteering at our children's schools and might as well do it full time.

Our blended family of four children kept me pretty busy with home, school, soccer, baseball, gymnastics, music lessons, and scouting. Our kids are grown, getting ready to finish college and grad school, but their early learning sparked my interest in education in general. I earned my BS in Early Childhood-Elementary Education at Temple University in 1988. Since graduation, I have taken many Science Education courses as well as classes in Design-Based Education, Children's Literature, and Leadership Training.

When I completed my teacher training, I was looking forward to working with kindergarten children, but (as so often happens!) I became a 7th grade, self-contained classroom teacher instead. Prepared by the often rocky adolescence of my own children, I was

pleased to find that my seventh graders were just bigger versions of the younger kids I'd enjoyed as a student teacher. I taught all basic subjects to my class for four years, before moving to Central East.

As a native of Philadelphia and a resident of a nearby community, I became aware of the Feltonville parents' organizing efforts. The parents were calling for a new middle school to service their community. Prior to their demands, adolescents were being bused out of Feltonville to alleviate overcrowding and to desegregate schools in other neighborhoods.

I was excited by the possibilities of being part of a new school from its inception, and I began attending the community planning sessions. My decisions first, to become a teacher and later, to transfer to Central East Middle School, have been very rewarding.

Central East has been adopted by Johns Hopkins University and is a pilot site for their "Talent Development Model" of instruction. Our school is also the middle school link in the IBM "Reinventing Education" grant in Philadelphia. I serve as the coach for a Critical Friends Group (CFG) of teachers drawn from our school and the elementary and high school involved in the IBM grant. The CFG is linked to the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

I also act as the science leader at our school and facilitate regular meetings of the science department. As leader I am also responsible for the coordination of family science nights and our annual science fair.

Our staff at Central East is an exciting one, where you can always find colleagues who are ready to look at the hard questions and develop new initiatives. And our students, well, they make sure it is never boring. I enjoy learning about new things and feel that

teaching adolescents is a constant voyage of discovery.

I teach five sections of seventh and eighth grade science in our annex. Our school reflects Feltonville's culturally diverse, urban community. This is our seventh year of operation. I welcome this opportunity to write about a year as part of CEMS.

**A busy summer**

As I think about the start of this school year I'm reminded of the programs I've attended this summer and the commitments I've made. At first glance, my plans for the year may seem disjointed, but they all merge together for me, and I hope they will for my students.

My goals grow out of my own professional experiences this summer. In late June, I traveled to Wellesley College in Massachusetts for a conference on "Gender Issues in Teaching Science." As a science teacher, I am concerned when all of my students, especially my girls, see scientists as "mostly male, mostly white" and almost exclusively as nerds. One of my goals every year is to break down my students' perception of science as something that's not for them.

I'm also clear that quite a few of my female, immigrant students are being told at home that they don't need science - and they don't really need school. Some of my kids are betrothed as toddlers, and each year more and more are pregnant before they leave middle school. In response to this crisis, I feel a need to figure out why my girls when presented with other choices, still aren't using the technology as much as the boys and why they stop taking science classes as soon as possible in high school.

At Wellesley, I co-designed a project to deal with some of these concerns. The project is called, "Ask the Girls," and we aim to do just that. We plan to initiate a conversation with girls about the ob-

stacles to their success in middle school. We are deliberately going beyond science class alone, because we know that there are broader factors affecting girls' lack of progress. "Ask the Girls" will be initiated in the three middle schools in our cluster. ( A cluster is a group of elementary and middle schools that all feed into the same comprehensive high school.) We hope to build trust and gather data this year. We would like the girls to develop a videotape about their experiences that we could use with the full staff at our three schools.

I have sponsored an after-school group called "Girl Talk" for four years. About 15 join "Girl Talk" each year. They offer each other support and sponsor women's history activities and celebrations. While I have thoroughly enjoyed my work with these girls, I have been painfully aware of its limited effect in a school of 1100 and a cluster of thousands.

Through "Ask the Girls," we hope to involve as many as 45 young women in grades 6-8. We'll spend September and October laying the groundwork in each school. In the meantime, I'll be trying to deepen my own understanding of this thorny problem through my readings and discussions with teachers.

As soon as I returned from Wellesley, it was time to start the Technology-Assisted Problem Solving Program (TAPS) at my school. TAPS was a three-week ungraded, enrichment program for students in grades 6-8. IBM sponsored the program as part of its "Reinventing Education" grant in our cluster. I designed the TAPS program with two other members of my Critical Friends Group (CFG). Forgive the alphabet soup, but I should explain the grant and its relationship to our critical friends group and an ongoing professional development model called Continuous Practice Improvement. "Reinventing Education" is part of a 10-city initiative by IBM, which infuses

technology into regular classroom instruction. As one of the recipients, our school received a large donation of computer hardware, software, and training. In particular, the initial "grant" teachers received five PC's in their classrooms. I was one of those teachers.

**Making some critical friends**

An integral part of the grant initiative was the development of a model for ongoing professional development. The Continuous Practice Improvement Model (CPI) is made up of resident teachers who collaborate with visiting teachers as we learn to use the technology and standards-based teaching practices in our classrooms. CPI visits are organized in cycles of five days' length. The grant pays for a replacement teacher, who continues instruction in the classroom of either the resident or visiting teacher in his/her absence.

My decision to train as a Critical Friends coach in '96 grew out of my involvement in the IBM grant and the development of the CPI model. While attending an IBM meeting, I learned that the Annenberg Institute was providing training that would support teachers who wanted to work in groups as "critical friends" - examining lessons together, observing each other's teaching, and thinking more deeply about how to improve instruction.

CFG coaches are trained as team builders. I learned a repertoire of skills and activities designed to help teachers get to the hard questions at the center of our work. I also learned how to look at my own leadership style, an ongoing process. After my training, a CFG was established for those "grant" teachers interested in pursuing ongoing collaboration about our technology use in particular and student achievement in general.

After two years as CFG members and after a year of CPI visits, some of us felt ready to experiment with an enrichment program. With IBM's support, TAPS was born! TAPS was our baby - our only requirement was that we include CPI visits in the program. Students volunteered to participate based on their interest in a smaller class which promised to be computer-intensive. The student body was inclusion based. We had regular ed and special ed, we had native speakers of English and ESOL students, and we had all three grades mixed in the three classrooms.

Over the course of the three-week program, approximately 33 students learned about "food safety," our theme. We wanted to teach basic skills, critical thinking, and technology under this umbrella. Nine visiting teachers, one per resident per week, observed and interacted with the residents and the students.

The program was a tremendous success. The feedback from the students and visiting teachers was overwhelmingly positive. We organized a culminating activity, a Food Safety Fair, that was well attended. The fair was designed and staffed by our students. They taught the lessons they had learned about food safety to their audience, using a wide variety of computer skills. Their exhibits ranged from a poster gallery to a "Microbe Metro" newspaper to a hyperstudio slide show.

My/our goal in relation to TAPS is still in the form of a question at this point. How do we build on the experience of the summer program in ways that help the participating students grow and spread the lessons throughout our school? Why was TAPS so successful? Was it the small class size? Was it the element of student choice? Was it the combination of both? Our heads are spinning with questions, and I suspect there aren't any easy answers. We've

already decided to hold ongoing sessions with the student participants, and we've talked about introducing them as TAPS tutors or student tech leaders at our school. We're still in the process of summing up the whole experience, and I expect to return to this topic often throughout the year.

TAPS ended on July 24th, and after cleaning up, three of us left for an Annenberg seminar on Collaborative Inquiry. The intense seminar took place in Dedham, Massachusetts. We studied the action research of others, discussed the questions or areas we felt passionate about, and developed our focus questions.

Since all three of us are "grant" teachers it wasn't a big surprise that our focus was on technology. We've invested lots of time and energy into trying to integrate technology into our instruction. Our school is in the process of buying at least one computer for every classroom. All those new teachers will be encouraged to visit us as part of CPI. They will also be invited to join the existing CFG. You might say we're surrounded by technology.

Given this investment in technology, we decided to focus on its impact. We wondered if using computers increases students' grasp of basic skills and if it stimulates their critical thinking abilities. We're all excited about having computers, and we know the kids seem a lot more motivated, but we don't yet know what the payoff is. In our CFG, in CPI, we're constantly trying to refine our practice to increase student achievement. We think our action research grows directly from this work.

During the next few weeks, we'll be presenting our action research idea to the CFG and the whole staff. The group that comes together to conduct the inquiry will refine the question and begin the project. For my part, I intend to ask students if they see a

difference. I will also ask them for evidence to support their ideas. I can already hear them groaning, but they'll get into it. I always introduce the idea of "thinking about thinking" or metacognition in my classes and this inquiry will push me even further.

After Dedham, I came home and packed up for a week's vacation in Maine. It was great, just the break I needed. All the summer's experiences had a chance to settle and ferment a bit. I spent a lot of time reading and even more time thinking about the tasks I've taken on.

**Goals for a new school year**

I am anxious to begin, but I don't feel overwhelmed, at least not during my waking hours. My annual back-to-school nightmares are in full force! All of my "projects" are related to my work as a teacher and a coach. In our Critical Friends Group, we're committed to advancing student achievement, to equity, and to a collective examination of our practice. I think my projects put meat on the bones of those goals. We also have a goal of making our work public, and I will be presenting my professional portfolio in January to a panel of CFG members in NY.

Finally, I see my commitment to this diary as another way to reflect on my practice and make it public. Every September, I've promised myself that I'd keep a teaching diary. And every year, after a week or two, I've broken that promise. Now that I've made a public commitment to write, I know I shall do it. In return for my investment, I hope to learn about my own teaching, my students, and our school's culture.

The adventure begins!

***September 14, 1998***

***"We've spent all our energy and quite a bit of anxiety just getting started."***

Has it really only been four days? Seems impossible. After one day back it felt as though I'd never left. My classes went pretty smoothly, with the usual differences before and after lunch. It was a relief to know three classes from last year. I only have to learn two sections of names and faces. I wonder if it's a relief for the kids too? I'll have to ask them. A few graduates came back after school yesterday, and I got one letter from a girl I had three years ago. I doubt they know how much it means to me to see and hear from them.

I introduced a focus on learning and leadership styles by using a modified "rock & feather" activity. We had great discussions in each of my eighth grade groups. One boy said he was a river and not a pond because he likes change, likes to learn new things, likes adventure. A girl said she was a rock and not a feather because she's stubborn and difficult to move.

Everyone said they were leaders and we talked about the idea of everyone's leading and getting nowhere. Next week we'll do an activity called, "What's Your Metacognition MO?" and kids will start to keep lists of thinking strategies or skills that work for them.

We'll also start our journals, and I'll get to see how the kids feel about this beefed-up approach toward introspection. It feels right to me, but I need to hear more from them.

This week was pretty uneventful in terms of other projects. We spent all our energy and quite a bit of anxiety just getting started. I came home and crashed the first two days - and I'm not a nap person.

A colleague and I went to one meeting this week. Each year we take kids to a dress rehearsal of an opera. We had to go to the orientation for *La Boheme*. The opera is on Sat., Oct 10th. I'll take 10 kids from each of my three eighth grades. The kids will volunteer to attend, knowing that they have to come in early three or four days to learn about the opera and complete the preliminary assignments. The trip is part of a project called the "Sounds of Learning." I began participating as a reading teacher, but the kids and I enjoyed it so much that we've continued even though I can't fit it into my regular science class time.

One bit of good news that came through was the acceptance of our "Arts in Education" grant proposal. We were supposed to hear last May, but better late than never. I wrote a proposal for a tile mosaic of the layers of the sea to be developed up around our atrium's staircase. In the past I've done large paper murals with my seventh graders, so this will be an extension of that work. We'll also develop supplemental materials like brochures and activity booklets for younger students. The plan is to invite our feeder elementary schools over for mini-lessons, taught by seventh graders. The kids are excited about the opportunity, and my eighth graders want to know if they can get in on it too.

Time as always is my enemy. The artist is scheduled to begin on Oct. 6th so we'll start our oceanography unit next week, but we must also continue giving the science fair our attention. The fair is a school-wide requirement, and projects must be completed by Dec.

1st. Figuring out how to integrate both strands so the kids stay focused rather than fragmented is my goal.

It's good to be back. Like my student, I choose the river with all its twists, turns, and new adventures. I think it's going to be a good year! ✍

***September 21, 1998***

***As the pace of school picks up, Deb is busy with planning, projects, and parent gatherings.***

A lot happened this week. We had the first school council meeting of the year and planned some activities to encourage community involvement in the school. First, we'll have our annual Back to School Night on Wednesday. We usually have a good turnout. This year we'll be introducing parents to our discipline code which hasn't been changed but has been spelled out a bit more to ensure that we're all on the same page.

The next activity will be a full Saturday of tile setting for the mosaic mural project in our building. I'm pleased that the artist agreed to this because it means working families can get involved, and I'll miss less class time. Finding the right balance between special project opportunities and regular class time is always a struggle.

We also set the date for our first "Family Math, Science, and Technology Night" for Nov. 19th. Our planning will begin on Oct. 2nd and we hope a lot of our staff will volunteer - they usually do. We'll need all the help we can get; last year 600 folks came out! I hope we can match that again.

We had a (CPI) Continuous Practice Improvement planning meeting too. (See Introduction for information on CPI.) We set up the schedule for teacher visits through the end of December. We

also talked about some training our technology facilitator can do to level the playing field for all the visitors. In the past some folks have come to visit without knowing how to get into the web site or what their password was and we lost a lot of time going over those details. This year I hope we'll be able to get right into lesson design and management.

During the CPI meeting we talked about the need to identify other resident teachers. It was mentioned that some people are leery because they think being a resident means working like I do. I'm going to approach some of my "critical friends" (in my Critical Friends Group - see my Intro) about this problem. I like to be involved in a lot of projects, and I have a lot of energy, but I don't want to back others off from increased involvement. If my "leadership" is scaring folks off then it's not the kind of leadership I want to give.

I'm glad I have my CFG colleagues to turn to for this kind of honest discussion. We took a full year to build our trust in each other, and I know I'll get some good questions and feedback from them. Working on a question like this alone would just be a drag, where I'd probably just feel really low, then confused, and then just go back to the same style of work. With a "critical friends" discussion, there is a procedure to make sure I can discuss the issue in a depersonalized way and be accountable, which is so much more meaningful for the work. I'm sure I'll have more to say on this next time.

***September 28, 1998***

***Stress builds, and Deb adopts a new motto: "Interruptions are my life!"***

**STRESS!** As a middle school teacher I used to say things like "hormones are my life" and joke about the ups and downs of normal adolescent mood swings, but now I'm definitely changing my motto to "interruptions are my life!"

After a mere twelve days of class, we are hosting a gala visit on Monday with international guests from South Africa, Viet Nam, and Australia. These visitors are coming to see how the students use the computers. Since the delegation is so impressive, the mayor and school superintendent are coming too.

All of this would be great in November, but now after 12 days - some of which were not science sessions - I have to be observed. Yesterday as I tried to get ready for my observation in a normal unstaged way (I have this "principle" of working for real in front of visitors - no handpicked students or review lessons)...well, let's just say the trouble began with a router problem, or in plain English, my online connection went down, so the computers were not terribly user friendly.

After I adjusted my lesson to a *Claris Works* application, BINGO, fire drill time! Now we come back to class, everyone gets settled and not one, but two phone calls come in, followed by an announcement that "All students going to Sunday's Puerto Rican

Day parade are to pack up and be escorted to a special meeting in the other building!"

Finally, with 17 minutes left to go, I get my class of now 15 on the computers, and we begin a spreadsheet that will graph the ocean floor. The kids are focused, I'm happy - it doesn't take much to please me - and guess what happens next: the computer repair folks arrive, and before you know it, the bell rings!

At this point, I have no idea what's going to happen on Monday, but whatever it is, it will be real!

Having unloaded all of that, I should say that I usually welcome visitors. I think it makes my kids feel important, and it underlines the value of their work, especially when the visitors are folks who aren't their teachers or families.

After the visit on Monday, I'll have my first Critical Friends Group meeting of the year. I'm excited about starting up again. Based on some discussions with a few CFG members, we'll be broadening the responsibility for the meetings this year. While my intention was to be an efficient coach/leader in the past, I think I inadvertently fell into the role of too much control and not enough empowerment. Our group is strong, and we have accomplished a lot in our two years together, but I'm confident that my/our recognition of this weakness will push us forward in the next period.

A few of us attended a summer session on collaborative inquiry last August and we'll be reporting back to the group on Monday. We hope that they'll be ready to join us in some action research about technology. While we were away, we talked about how we all wanted computers and that we're all getting them, but we're not really clear on the payoff in terms of student achievement. We think the research will help us refine our technology integration

and will give us the documentation to plan for the future.

On a different note, I had a boy who was absent call me at home to discuss his science fair problem. He asked the most thoughtful questions. I could tell he'd been really thinking about it. I don't think he can possibly know how good it made me feel to have a student show me so clearly that he cared about the work. It was also very nice to give him my undivided attention.

The boy, I'll call him Steve, is thoughtful but a little slow in his processing. I can't ever seem to stop long enough to really answer his questions in class when there are at least 32 others needing a piece of me. I guess this was just a glimpse of what smaller class size would be like. Kids getting feedback quickly and fully and teachers feeling like, hey I'm really getting through to them.

*October 5, 1998*

***Deb's students turn in a peak performance when international guests tour Central East Middle School.***

**Monday, Monday...**

It was a great day, after all my anxiety. I worried myself right into a monster head cold, so I sounded like a baritone; but the kids were cooperative and anxious to show off their knowledge and skills for our visitors. Lots of hands were raised for every question I asked, and they asked thoughtful questions of their own too. The students on the computers acted like they'd been using them for years, not days.

I should have known that they would do their best when we got down to the wire. They always do, except on standardized tests. But why? What have we communicated to the kids that says visitors are important, but these tests are not? If they can impress an IBM vice-president and foreign dignitaries, if they can impress me and other teachers, why do they bomb on the tests?

I've been wrestling with this dilemma for years, and I don't feel any closer to a solution. I am, however, paying more attention to test vocabulary and test-taking skills. It's painful to see bright kids shut out of special high school programs because of test scores that only give a very limited view of their abilities. It's also painful to take a public beating in the press when your scores are published each year.

On another note, our first Critical Friends Group meeting went well. I spoke to some of the other teachers before the meeting, and they prepared to introduce different parts of the agenda. Sharing the leadership loosened things up. Many spoke up and shared their "teaching passions," and when we looked at the list, we saw pretty clearly that we all care about the same things, such as helping kids become literate so they can solve real problems. One person might have called it basic skills, and another spoke about reading ability, but the message was the same. We also agreed that since we're all using computers we'd like to look closely at the connection between technology and our kids' skills.

The group agreed to focus on the collaborative inquiry question that the three of us came up with this summer: "How can the use of technology lead to improved basic skills instruction and promote critical thinking?" In order to start planning some solid action research about this question, we've agreed to read a case study about another Philadelphia school and the way its questions changed once the real inquiry began.

We talked about our summer reading too. In May we agreed to pair off and read four different books about education. We were supposed to write comments about our readings on a secure web site which IBM designed for us, but I was the only one who wrote. They did read though. After a while, I felt rather silly writing to myself, and we had a good laugh about it at the meeting. One teacher said she wondered if maybe I wasn't getting answers they couldn't see, but she said she didn't want to interrupt!

On a more serious note we talked about our varied comfort levels writing online and worked out a schedule for book talks at upcoming CFG meetings. I'm looking forward to the discussions of

the books and I hope that we can break down some of the discomfort folks still feel about writing online. In retrospect, I can see it was pretty foolish of me to think that folks who are still leery of E-mail would hold an online conversation about their reading, but then, I've always been an optimist.

We spent the rest of the meeting sharing websites and catching up on the latest plans to update our computers and our training to use them.

Back in my classroom, I had a bit of a homework crisis. We were off on Wednesday, and on Thursday at least half of my 165 students were unprepared. It was not a good day. My lessons depended on completion of the work, and I had to spend a great deal of time writing notes home in student planners. It was frustrating to say the least, but it did put things back on track for Friday. Was it the extra day off or just normal adolescent testing of the limits? I'll never know, but I really dislike days like that, days where I feel more like a cop than a teacher.

Next week the artist begins working with the mural design team from seventh grade. This weekend I'll be figuring out lessons for the rest of my classes that will keep them connected to the project and 15 students they elected as their design representatives. After the first week or so, they'll all be involved directly, but the initial phase is fragmented. How to design lessons that subs will use and the kids will benefit from is the question. Wish me luck.

***October 12, 1998***

***The spectre of a talented principal's departure invokes anger, worry, and disappointment among the staff.***

I knew this was going to be a hard week because my mural project was slated to begin, but I was totally unprepared for the news I got first thing Monday morning. My principal made a special trip to the annex to let me know that he was a finalist in his bid for a suburban principalship. Even though we work very closely and I also consider him a friend, I had no idea he was even thinking about leaving.

Taking a deep breath, I congratulated him in a tone that I hoped sounded sincere. After all, this was a colleague and a friend, right?

A delegation from the suburbs was coming to observe and interview some of us today, Friday. My principal would then go and spend the day with that team on Monday, a holiday for us. It was this impending visit which prompted his "news."

Monday is a bit of a blur at this point. By day's end everyone had heard about Friday's visit, and some were already speculating about who our next principal would be. I regained my sense of humor and told folks I intended to lie to the interview team in hopes of holding on to our principal; but all kidding aside, I was plenty worried.

Changing leaders sets you back, even if the replacement is wonderful. You have to go through a period of adjustment, getting used to the person's style and priorities. Things that were assumed or at best confirmed through an E-mail message may now require a meeting or at least a delayed response. In short, it's a nightmare when it happens at the beginning of the term; but now, when we've barely gotten started...let's just say I got a headache and fell asleep by 8 PM!

We have a great staff, and we'll muddle through, but who wants to muddle? It's really bad for morale. You make all sorts of plans, hold summer practices, and then lose your team captain after the second game. Now, even if he stays, we'll all be looking over our shoulders waiting for the next opening. Two days ago the local paper ran a story about all the suburban administrative vacancies, and since he's certainly qualified, it's just a matter of time.

Staff members are sad, worried, angry, disappointed, anything but happy. Some teachers are quietly making their own plans to leave at the first opportunity. The lure of the suburbs looms large. The pay is better, the classes are smaller, and the grass is always greener. On the other hand, our contract is only funded through the end of this term, and the state is threatening a takeover which would basically erase our rights if we keep asking them for more money, or dare to strike. I guess that wasn't really the other hand was it?

I'm committed to the city's kids, having grown up here myself, but I'm more than a little anxious about our future as public school employees. Charter schools are popping up all over, and concerned parents are buying all their claims about better discipline, more computers, and smaller class sizes. Most parents don't know that the

teachers are mostly new and mostly unprepared to run their classrooms, let alone a whole school.

If the charters get the kids whose parents act as advocates, who does that leave in the public schools? The kids with the greatest needs, the ones with no one to act as advocates will get left behind.

At the same time, funds and programs are being slashed. It feels like fighting, first with one hand tied behind your back and then with both tied. Is that a fair fight? Is giving the kids with advantages more advantages, democracy in action? I don't think so; and the kids know it's not, from a very early age.

Tomorrow is Philadelphia CARES day and we'll be planting shrubs and painting a mural at our school with the help of business and community volunteers. I support these programs, and my shovel is already in the car, but flashy Band-Aids are no substitute for full funding and support of quality public education for all. I do believe my kids can succeed, but I'm mighty tired of all the curve balls that get thrown at them every step of the way. ✍

***October 19, 1998***

***"Organized chaos" rules when the seventh-grade mural project wrecks the schedule.***

This week has been a good example of what I like to call *organized chaos.* Some of my colleagues have less affectionate terms for it, I'm sure. Our seventh graders are working on a two-story mosaic mural of the layers of the sea. We are working with an artist who's being paid through an Arts in Education grant which I wrote last year.

The basic idea for the project was to design and develop a mosaic in our atrium which depicts the layers and life of the sea as the wall travels down along the stairs. After the mosaic is complete, our seventh graders will develop materials and conduct lessons for elementary students in our district in our mini marine life museum. We've named our exhibit, "Sea Life - from Floor to Shore". The deepest ocean trench starts at the floor level and swirls up past a shipwreck to a coral reef, a tide pool, and finally the beach at the top of the stairs.

The students are learning wonderful art skills and are very interested in the science end too. Today, which is Saturday, lots of kids are coming in to set tiles from 10 to 4, hopefully with some parents as well.

The chaotic part is the scheduling. In order to make use of the artist for twelve days, we've had to get students released from other

subjects, and I've been out of class a lot too. The artist can handle working with 15 to 20 kids at a time, given the space and need for instruction. Balancing special projects and their "chaotic effects" with the importance of consistency and other people's planning needs has put a strain on some staff relations.

I see special opportunities as a chance to excite students, both those who already engage and do their work and those who are reluctant to admit to any curiosity or desire to learn. I know I can build on the mural experience to teach science content, writing and presentation skills, and a host of citizenship lessons as well. I'm excited about the kids' ownership of this process and the ongoing use of the space. I've also gotten to bond with kids who I just got to know in September. The down side is that some of my colleagues feel that pulling kids out of their classes means their work isn't seen as sufficiently important.

As I'm writing this I can see that if the full team had been involved in a discussion of the schedule before the reality hit, we'd have minimized these problems. Instead, there was just an announcement that we'd gotten funded for the project and when the artist would be coming.

Going a step further, I can see that my focus was almost entirely on student empowerment and not nearly enough on teacher ownership. Since I know that I think the other subjects are important and that I'd welcome an opportunity for small group instruction, I assumed that everyone else would be in the same place.

When I realized that some folks were upset, I felt hurt and unsupported. I was looking at my loss of preps and lunch and misunderstanding their frustrations. I'm sure some people would

complain regardless of the process, but I'm having one of those "ouch" moments when you realize how you screwed things up, even if it was with the best of intentions... I brought in a coffee cake and a thank you/apology note for the inconvenience yesterday, and now I see that I should ask for some agenda time at the next team meeting. It's too late to turn back the clock, but maybe we can set some ground rules before the next project rolls around.

Back to the kids. Watching them learn to work cooperatively and take pride in their work has been wonderful. Regular and special education students have worked side by side, and while the special ed kids are a little more shy in this setting, everyone has been respectful of each other. The artist is very laid back and gives the students lots of ongoing feedback and encouragement. She makes everyone feel like they can contribute - even non-artist types like me.

Lisa, the artist, began with a design team of 15 students, selected by their classmates. On the first day she had the students drawing sections of their vision for the "space." As new groups of students have gotten involved, Lisa has called on the designers as her turnaround trainers, and it's worked like a charm. One boy, in particular, who I was worried would clown around, was explaining sea floor spreading to a visitor when I walked in on Wednesday. Needless to say, I was pleasantly surprised, remembering that I came very close to imposing a veto when he was selected.

By the time we're through, about 150 kids will have been involved, along with members of the community, other staff members, and my Mom, who pitched in yesterday for a few hours. One of the boys asked me yesterday if we could start using the atrium door as our entrance so that everyone could appreciate this

work. Another teacher is talking about designing a quilt, with her after school club, of sea creatures to hang from above the mural. On the whole, it's been an incredible learning adventure which we won't soon forget.

On a more personal note, I feel great about learning to set tiles. My paternal grandfather, Arcadio Bambino, was a tile setter from Italy. He died when I was five and we no longer have any samples of his craft. I guess I'm sort of keeping his memory alive while taking it in a direction that would probably surprise him. ✍

***October 26, 1998***

***The mosaic mural looks great, but Deb worries about her project's impact on teacher morale.***

The mosaic mural is done, and it looks great! It was an exhilarating and exhausting project. Going from a bare wall to a two-story piece of art in less than twelve days seemed like an impossible goal, but as the artist taught the kids to cheer, "We did it!"

Reading the students' evaluations I was struck by a few of their comments. Joe said, "I feel good, because when I get bigger my family will come see it." Dara said, "I feel happy about what I did. I feel proud. It was hard work. I put tiles on the wall. I liked making the grout. I feel great because we finished and we did it." Jonathan said, "I learned that there are not just fishes in the sea. I learned that you don't just put tiles on the wall. I feel very good about myself." When asked what he needed to learn next, Pedro said, "I need to practice talking to kids and others," and Cynthia wants to learn "to make a brochure about the process," and William wants to teach our guests "about all the different techniques the different fish use to get their food."

I'm glad the mural won't be just a one-shot deal. Special projects that come in with a bang and then just fade as a nice memory are too often the rule. Making this project an ongoing seventh grade responsibility is a challenge we hope to make into a reality. We're aiming for a December or January dedication of our

exhibit, with our first visiting classes in January. I've never thought about setting up a mini-museum before, and I'm excited about the possibilities. I can tell by the kids' evaluations that they're excited too.

Last week I wrote about the tension that resulted from my pulling students from other classes for the mural project. I raised the issue of special projects and their demands and more specifically the need to build full team ownership of these grant activities in my Critical Friends Group. We're going to discuss it at our November meeting.

In the meantime, I spoke to a few other teachers from my building and have found two completely different perspectives. On the one hand are the teachers who say it's good for the kids and we have to just go with the flow, like when we get called to assemblies, etc. On the other hand, and these are the folks I'm concerned about, there are teachers who release the kids with stern warnings about how they're responsible for every moment of work they've missed. I think the kids need to do the work too, but I feel badly about the resentment that's hanging in the air.

These teachers don't really want to discuss the project and its effects. They're just glad it's over. My dilemma is, do I pursue it in a team meeting as well as in the CFG or do I let it go and try to organize my end of the bargain better the next time? I guess that's what we'll focus on in next month's CFG discussion.

I'm going away tomorrow for a week's training at the Smithsonian. Johns Hopkins, one of our adopters, set it up. I'm sorry to be out during the term and I'm also uneasy because it's ended up being back to back with the mural project. But once again, the opportunity to get training and enough free materials for all 99 of my eighth graders was too good an offer to refuse.

However, planning lessons for subs, who you know won't follow them, is an exercise in futility. My gerbils are being boarded in another classroom; my fish and plants are being cared for by students with letters of introduction; my CD player is locked in the office; my staplers and scissors are locked in my locker, and all of the computers are locked and turned off. It's a nightmare! I'm probably responsible for killing a small forest with all the work I've copied. I guess I just have to hope for the best and focus on the training, right? That's what my head says, now if my stomach would only catch up.

It strikes me that it's ironic that my training is for a unit on catastrophic events. Some how I don't think the planners would consider missing a week of school catastrophic, but I certainly do! I think every teacher could use a clone, maybe then we could feel like we're getting our work done.

***November 2, 1998***

***A week at the Smithsonian leaves Deb and her science-teaching colleagues surprised and challenged.***

What a week. I just completed a week's worth of training at the National Science Resources Center at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. My training was in preparation for a field test of an STC (Science and Technology for Children) unit on catastrophic events like storms, earthquakes, and volcanoes.

In the past, I've attended lots of science training sessions and I've piloted new kits. I've even developed new units with teams of educators and developers, but this was different. My other efforts were serious, and I have a great deal of respect for the folks I've worked with and the lessons we developed, but I don't think we hit on the progression of concepts in our lessons that was presented this week.

Inquiry-based learning and a constructivist approach are not jargon or educationese for me. The first time I heard these labels I felt affirmed, like my goals and approach made sense to other people too. I was happy to learn that I was part of a movement to reform science education. But something still wasn't clicking for the kids. Even though I was using these methods, it sometimes felt inconsistent, like it was hit-or-miss. There's always been this nagging sensation that although my students enjoy my labs and projects, they don't leave me with enough of the solid concepts under their belts.

This week we completed a series of 25 activities, at least three major assessments, and a variety of anchor and extension possibilities. It's always interesting to meet teachers from around the country, and it was a kick to be at the Smithsonian Institute, but otherwise I thought it was going to be the usual drill. You go to your sessions, you try out the lessons and materials, and you take what you like back - usually leaving a fair amount behind.

But this time the leader kept hammering away about how she'd really like feedback about the progression and whether the whole package worked. She stressed the need for us to try the unit as written before we began to adapt and modify things. To be honest, I listened politely and nodded where appropriate, but figured I'd do what I needed to when I got back home. Somewhere around the end of the second day it became clear that there was something more going on at these sessions and there was some tension in the air. We were being pushed by this work and we were pushing back. Questions and break-time discussions about whether we really needed to do "all" of these activities or test "all" of our students emerged.

As the unit progressed, I began to see that certain concepts and activities were really built on one another, and I began to change my mind. Or maybe I should say the unit began to change my mind for me. Now I'm really excited about this field test. I'm glad I'll be using it with all three of my eighth-grade classes, and I'm anxious to see how they do on the performance tests that we'll administer.

I began to wish I could attend the other sessions too. There were other groups learning about units on human body systems, energy and motion, and matter and molecules. I don't mean to sound like a sales pitch, but I think these units are a cut above what I've been using in my classes so far. If the "oohs" and "ahhs" of the

teachers are any indication, I think the kids are in for a real treat. I'm especially excited about some of the models the kids will design to mimic the Earth's plates and the way they move. I've been searching for ways to make these concepts concrete, and I think these models do the trick.

A teacher from the human body group said the materials they received raised instruction from the usual "name that system" approach to an understanding of the complex interactions of the body as a whole. On a similar note, our unit connects the range of catastrophic events and showed how and why they're related. I can't wait to see how my kids respond.

On the train ride home I began to worry about my classroom and how it will look on Monday morning. On top of that I'm concerned about the morale of the staff, myself included. My principal got the job in a nearby suburban district and will be leaving us soon. I'm sure next week's entry will be devoted to the roller coaster of selecting a new administrator.

***November 9, 1998***

***Deb pays the predictable price for taking a week away from her school.***

Coming back after a week away was an uphill battle. I had a different sub every day so there was no continuity. My room was a mess. Books were everywhere and anywhere. My refrigerator was emptied except for the carrots which were thrown around and my worms which were still safely in their container. One of the subs left me a long note about how much she liked my books and comments which reminded me of a book report about one of the titles. She said, " I couldn't put this one down." I found myself wishing she had put the book down and paid a little more attention to the kids!

Everything seemed harder this week, and I know it's because of anxiety about our principal's impending departure. It's like a whole other layer of stress has been added, and it's just filtering down on our work.

I find myself dividing tasks into two groups, things to finish before he leaves and things to get in place so they can be done after he leaves. Like the dedication of the mosaic mural: it's getting moved up so we can have it before he leaves. He was really supportive of the whole thing, even worked with the kids putting up tiles on our Saturday work session. It wouldn't seem complete to have our celebration without him.

Then there's the science fair judging, which takes place ten days after he leaves. In the past he's funded lunch for the judges and given me use of the conference room all day. I needed to nail all of that down now, so that there aren't any surprises the day of the event. As I'm writing this these details sound like little things, but when you add them to the larger issues of political and economic uncertainty I can almost feel the rug as it's being pulled out from under me.

We had a school council meeting, and our cluster leader came to discuss the selection process for our next principal. We reviewed our criteria and our school profile and had a lot of unity as parents, teachers, and community members about who and what we want. The question is, will we get it and if so when? We'll get to interview and vote, which I realize is a luxury that many schools don't have, but we don't know when. In the meantime, we'll be assigned an acting administrator, and it could be anyone from a rookie to someone who's been retired or marking time in a back room downtown. Doesn't exactly inspire confidence or energy for the next period.

On a brighter note, I had a good meeting with the principals of our cluster's three middle schools. The proposal for a network of "Ask the Girls" clubs was adopted. It took a long time to bring all the folks in charge together; we've been trying to meet since September, but we got the green light! Our plan is to start with pilot groups of girls at the middle level in Year One and then branch out to the upper and lower grades in the next two years. Because the USI (Urban Systemic Initiative) is sponsoring us, we're getting great materials like K'nex and LINX to introduce as nontraditional design and technology activities. We're also going to bring the girls to-

gether on two Saturdays for cluster-wide events, one in the winter and one in the spring.

I'm excited about the possibilities of this network. We're hopeful that the combination of talking and support with hands-on science and tech activities will push the girls ahead in terms of course selection and career paths. We also hope to get some solid documentation that we can use with the staff and parents in terms of the needs and aspirations of our female population.

My group of girls started yesterday. We had a small turnout so we used it as an opportunity to plan for a larger kickoff. One of my former members came back and plans to return. It was great seeing her, and her visit underscores the need for our club at the high school level. A fifth grader came too. Wow, she's going to be some leader when she grows up. Usually fifth graders are kind of quiet at first. Not Veronica - she jumped right in and added her input. It was great!

I could write more about science fair madness and other topics, but my grades are due in a week and a half, and there's a pile of papers that are calling my name...ugh.

***November 16, 1998***

***Are science fairs a good investment of teaching and learning time? "I'm really wondering about it."***

It's that time of year when I agonize about the validity of a science fair as a school-wide requirement. I've been trained to understand all the cross-curricular values involved. I've even been guilty of some turnaround training on the subject, **but** when it comes right down to the reality of trying to help my 165 kids crank out their projects, well, that's another story.

Some kids meet me at school at seven o'clock each morning, others ask to come up during lunch to continue their work; but in every class there are at least some kids who still want to build a volcano or conduct some very unscientific taste test.

To my dismay, I must confess that most are still confused about variables and why we must control them. Kids always want to rush right into the experiments and skip the research. You can even forget the experiments - everyone loves decorating their boards and just wants to get started on them. In fact, at least one kid asks me every day, usually in the middle of a point I think I'm really driving home, "Ms. Bambino, when can we start buying boards?" I've got to admit, we do get some great looking displays, but how much science is really sinking in and how can we know?

Is this a requirement that teaches problem-solving skills and authentic science, or is it a show, a series of deadlines, a schedule that

dictates instruction? I'm not shirking my responsibility here, I'm really wondering about it.

We have a great system set up with a rubric for self and peer assessment. We select the top three projects from each class using the rubric and student presentations as our guide. We set up all the winning projects in the auditorium and have outside judges assess the projects and interview the student teams. We go through all the right steps, but at a certain point, like now, I worry that the deadlines are driving the process. The judges are already invited, the lunches are ordered; but can I stop everything and go back and review variables in any real way? Without a 12-hour school day, the answer is NO!

On the other hand, everyone is using computer spreadsheets to create charts and graphs. They are writing and rewriting their procedures and conclusions with a word processing program, and they will all make oral presentations. I believe everyone gets some understanding of the scientific process from this work; I just don't know if it's enough to justify the whole procedure.

This year instead of breathing a collective sigh of relief when the fair is over, I think we should develop a *Reflection Form* for students and staff alike, with questions about the basic process. I think I'll talk to our adopters at Hopkins about some assistance in this effort. Maybe next year we can do a pre- and post-assessment. And maybe my colleagues will hate me if they get surveyed just one more time.

In our quest for validation or accountability or whatever name we give it, we spend a good deal of time filling out surveys and being interviewed to assess our teaching and the subsequent learning which takes place. That reality leads me to another ques-

tion: How authentic is the data which we collect if the staff and students fill these things out with a "here we go again" attitude?

If we count the results as part of students' grades, they take it a bit more seriously; but then they try to give the answer they think we want to hear. If we make it anonymous, it seems pointless. In all fairness to the kids, they've grown accustomed to being asked for their input only to find out that the decisions get made higher up without concern for their voices - sounds a lot like what happens to teachers, doesn't it?

*(Deb continues ruminating about science fairs in her next diary entry.)*

On a different note, my E-mail just broke through with the news that the applications for principal of our school are due on Dec. 4th, which means interviews can take place before the winter break. I'm relieved that the process isn't lagging, but I'm anxious to see the applications and how quickly the district will move on our recommendation.

***November 23, 1998***

***Deb's Friday session with the "Ask the Girls" group picks up her lagging spirits.***

My classroom has continued to be "Science Fair Central" this week. I take attendance, sell display boards, and then cut the kids loose to work on their projects. This means that those who are completely on track are either having me do a final edit before they print or, if they're truly advanced, they're decorating their boards.

Others are finishing up their data collection, lagging just a bit behind schedule. And then there's the last group, and thankfully this is the smallest group, who are still trying to figure out what their procedure is and are wondering why they need an hypothesis anyway because they just want to decorate a board like the first group!

One boy made up a fictitious project, complete with data and procedure. He reported that he'd grown an apple seed, lemon seed, and orange seed into plants that were thriving and all of this took place in the last two weeks. He was honest when I asked him if he'd made it up; he didn't get indignant. I called his Dad, and he's testing my plants now as a substitute project.

I am definitely going to see if other science teachers want to generate a science fair evaluation form with me. Even if everyone doesn't buy in, I'd like to get some student feedback from kids who aren't the "winners" in this process.

Some of my areas of concern are: free choice of projects vs. teacher-selected; optional participation vs. universal requirement; independent assignment vs. guided research and production; fall frenzy vs. spring culmination project.

At this point, I'm leaning toward a culmination project with staggered deadlines, which means our kids won't be eligible for the city-wide Carver Fair or the Delaware Valley Fair unless they use the previous term's work or unless they are self-motivated. Carver is in March with applications submitted in December and January, while DelVal is a bit later. I'm just really concerned that we maximize the learning benefits and minimize the "factory model" aspects, which require everyone to be in lock-step with the same deadlines, etc. Maybe it should be a requirement by the end of grade seven.

Maybe I'm kidding myself and a culmination project would just end up being the same way at the end of the year - with a mad dash to do any project just to pass the course.

In the past, I was shocked to learn that most schools work with only a select group for science fair. I was proud that we gave "all" our students the opportunity and support they needed to succeed. But as I mentioned last week, I am having some serious doubts about the value of this whole process or at least in the way we have it organized now. I know how great it "can" be, I just don't know if the potential is a reality for the majority of our students.

It's probably not realistic to think that I'll have a chance to discuss this with anyone else in a meaningful way until after the holiday next week, but maybe I'll keep writing about it here until I get the chance. Who knows, maybe my own family will give me some pointers over dinner on Thursday - we all usually have strong opinions about everything!

On other school fronts, it was a very busy week. Last night was our annual "Family Math, Science, and Technology Night." It was a wonderful evening of educational games which culminated in a dinner with holiday door prizes. It's always nice to connect with families outside of report card or behavioral conferences, and last night was fun!

The mural dedication is scheduled for Dec. 3rd, and I'll meet with the design team next week to finish planning our mini-celebration. I think the kids would get a kick out of making toasts with sparkling cider. I'll have to run it by my principal. (He's leaving for his new job the next day...ugh.)

I end my teaching week each Friday with our "Ask the Girls" group, and today was one of those times when I know exactly why I'm teaching and even feel kind of privileged to be doing it. Ten girls attended, up from four two weeks ago, and the girls really began to "own" the group. A girl who was too shy to talk two weeks ago introduced herself as the "noisy one" today and proceeded to give a full report about a girls' conference we attended last Saturday!

The girls also brainstormed a list of things we can do together this year which included a camping trip, sleepover, and a holiday lunch out together, among other things. No matter how tired I am, it's always energizing to end my week with the girls; it keeps me focused on why I'm here. I feel lucky to have this group! It really helps clear the air when I'm worried about funding or who my next principal will be. It's nice to just kick back at the end of the week with the kids

***November 30, 1998***

***"If we're all teaching and they're not learning – defined as using the skills and information – are we teaching?"***

This was a short week for us because of Thanksgiving. Why is it that shorter weeks always feel longer? Is it because the break in the schedule sets everything off, or is it just the pulls of my "other" life as Mom, wife, cook, etc.?

My classes are consumed with the production of their science projects. We will start presentations next Wednesday. The more we focus on these projects the greater my concern for their educational value. This week because we're revising and editing, I'm feeling bogged down with language arts concerns.

I check my students' work before they print it. I do this as an editor and to avoid having them print everything only to need a second printing. I'm concerned about the waste of paper, ink and printer time, but I'm also concerned that the writing be their work and not mine.

When we're getting down to the wire, like now, and the work is still seriously flawed, it's hard to let it go. It's the one time that I actually get to conference with every single project team, and I like to make the most of it. Times were built in all along the way, but procrastinators made little to no use of earlier sessions, so here we are with deadlines closing in on all sides and panic replacing the "who cares" attitude of even the staunchest underachievers.

So where does this leave me? I've taught them how to use spell-check, and I feel I should ask them questions when their meaning is unclear, but I don't want to rewrite their work for them. I'm willing to assist non-native speakers with grammar problems vs. science problems, but I'm not going to rewrite their work either.

I used to teach writing and have read Atwell et al., but somehow when the kids get into another class, like science or social studies, they forget all about self- and peer-editing. When they clamor for my attention and the first paragraph has whole words missing, I'm feeling like I need help from my colleagues in the writing classes. ( In fact, when I hear everyone calling for me at the same time, I feel like I want to change my name.)

The kind of skills' transfer that reflects real learning just isn't happening. It would seem that if you learn measurement, graphing, calculating averages etc. in math, then you should be using that knowledge in science and elsewhere. Along the same lines, if you have reading/writing workshop down the hall, it should improve your written work in science too. What I'm experiencing, and I think others are finding the same thing, is that most kids come in as if the page is blank. They show little evidence of the teaching that I know is going on in other areas, which leads me to the "learning" question. If we're all teaching and they're not learning, defined as using the skills and information, are we teaching? Maybe we're presenting like crazy, but if kids aren't learning...

I just reached for the dictionary and looked up *learn* and *learning*. According to Random House's Collegiate version, when you *learn* you acquire knowledge or skill, and when you're *learning* there's a modification of behavior through practice. Based on these definitions, we've got a problem.

This year, one colleague checked the first draft of two sections' research papers and then returned them to the students and to me. Other colleagues agreed to use the same bibliographic format for all research assignments. The math department teaches metrics and basic graphing, **but** the kids revert to standard measurements, cite references sloppily, and copy straight out of texts instead of writing their understanding of the material. All of our teaming isn't paying off as we'd hoped.

I'm frustrated, but I don't think blaming the kids is the answer. Something's wrong here, and its implications are far greater than the science fair and how we can change it. All of the symptoms I've outlined point to a lack of ownership on the students' part. We're selling, but they're not buying our product. At best, they're renting some answers for this or that test and then it's history, like an apartment they've outgrown. I guess I'm talking about student-centered learning, but on a higher level than we've achieved.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: School reform expert Phil Schlechty has written that "perhaps the most important understanding . . . is that students are volunteers, whether we want them to be or not. Their attendance can be commanded, but their attention must be earned. Their compliance can be insisted on, but their commitment is under their own control."*

***December 7, 1998***

***Deb's kids begin judging science projects, using a rubric that prompts "some very good questions."***

The first round of science fair judging has begun. By next Wednesday, my classes will have selected the top three projects in each section, which will then move to the next round. We got through about two projects in a period. The students have asked some very good questions about the content and the process of the experiments, and most of the presenters have answered thoughtfully rather than defensively.

My kids are warming to the use of the rubric (*), and they seem to appreciate our discussions about whether a particular project "just meets the requirements" or "goes a step beyond."

Some of the students have rehearsed their presentations, and it's exciting to see them so well prepared and serious about their work. I allow volunteers to go first so I know I'm seeing the best

**Two years ago, I developed a scoring rubric that assesses each aspect of the science project from "problem stated as a question" to "abstract" and "presentation," using a four-point scale. A 4 indicates that the work met all requirements and went a step beyond; for example, three references were required, so anything beyond three could receive a score of 4. The rubric is posted at <http://www.middleweb.com/scifairrubric.html>*

work at the beginning. I'm hopeful that these initial presentations will serve two purposes - first, to buy a few more days for the procrastinators to complete their work, and second, to raise the bar in terms of what constitutes a successful project and presentation.

In the case of my eighth graders, it's exciting to see how much they've grown in just one year. A pair of boys, Jose and Luis, who did very little last year, are in a two-way tie for third place in a class of generally high achievers. This year the boys chose a problem that tested different types of salt or chemicals to see which melts ice best. They conducted their research using texts and the Internet, and they even spoke to someone from the city streets department downtown before conducting their experiment. They stood tall in front of the class and spoke with authority about their problem and their results. It was great to see them break out of their old roles as class cut-ups!

While I must confess to a growing sense of relief that so many students are presenting quality projects, I still want to explore the questions I've been raising over the last few weeks - questions about authenticity and student buy-in, questions about meaningful learning vs. the mindless meeting of deadlines.

I connected to my editor's note on my last entry and just read the interview with Phil Schlechty from the Center for Learning and School Reform in Louisville entitled "Rethinking Educational Assumptions." On a somewhat different note I'm also reading a collection of Anna Quindlen's columns called *Living Out Loud* and at the moment the jumble of ideas that are racing through my mind has me positively humming. I'm either about to have one of those *aha* moments or I'm going to short-circuit; it's too early to say which!

Quindlen talks about the essence of life being not in the answers, but in the living, in the ongoing questions that arise from the nitty gritty, from the process; and her sentiments ring true to me. It strikes me that this diary process is "teaching out loud," and that leads me back to Schlechty and his views about teachers as "leaders rather than performers."

In the interview, Schelechty says, "Rather than performing for the students, the job of the teacher is to get the student to perform...teachers are trying to engage students in working on knowledge...." Later in the piece there's a discussion about the shift in our culture from a society where a small elite was responsible for the "knowledge work" to a "knowledge work century" (Drucker) where we must all rise to the tasks of leadership and inquiry.

Discovering the ways to get our students to perform is at the heart of the dilemma I raised last week, and the "10 Critical Qualities of Student Work" raised by Schlechty has given me a new lens through which to consider this task. I'm planning to write a student evaluation form for the science fair process this weekend, and these "qualities" should prove useful in that effort.

I'm also going to copy the interview for my Critical Friends Group meeting on Monday. I think a text-based discussion of this piece will deepen our focus on student work in the next period.

Finally, I think I'll write something up about science fair for my colleagues in our science department to consider at our next meeting. I want to share the questions I've been grappling with before our next discussion so that we can get beyond a rubber-stamp level of agreement and get to some of their underlying questions as well.

At the end of the science fair process, we're all ready to agree to postponing or even cancelling next year's requirement. We're tired,

and time or the lack of it is our constant companion; but I'd like to see our science meetings as more than pragmatic sessions where we order materials, adjust schedules, and vent - although we do need to do all three. I know it's not a CFG group, but I think we need to push the envelope in order to raise the level of student science work.

My principal left yesterday and is being replaced by another Annenberg principal in the interim. What a relief. She is a strong, reform minded leader; but will she be permanently hired? Our School Council meets Tuesday night to consider the applications for permanent appointment. I wonder who and how many have applied? ✍

***December 14, 1998***

***Last year teachers made a commitment to focus on technical writing. "We fell very short of our goal."***

Most of the winning science boards are set up in the auditorium, and our outside judges arrive on Monday at 8:15. It has been a very stressful week with teachers and students blowing off deadlines left and right. I was pretty annoyed yesterday afternoon because the folks who were the biggest offenders were the ones who called for the earlier deadlines this year! It was the old salt-in-the-wound type of situation. However, a friend pointed out that if the deadline were in June, some folks would still be late; and after sleeping on it, I've decided he's probably right. The issues of teaching and learning vis-a-vis science fair are a lot more important in the long run.

The boards are impressive in many cases and alarming in others. Monday should be interesting. It's always exciting to round up the students and send them in for their interviews. Most rise to the occasion and take the process very seriously. They stand proudly by their work, extend their hands in introduction and answer the judges' questions thoughtfully.

We haven't had any casualties yet. The first time I judged at the city-wide fair a boy took one look at me and lost his breakfast! I felt badly for him, and I'm sure neither of us will ever forget the experience.

I see the presentations as especially important for our kids because many of them are not accustomed to speaking to unfamiliar adults about anything. It is a real stretch for them to outline their thinking about a problem and defend their reasoning and experience. The presence of the outside judges authenticates the importance of the work, and they respond accordingly.

This year we adjusted our written requirements. We decided to drop the research paper in grades five and six but left the bibliography and log book in place. Last year we were alarmed that so few students completed log books and that those that were submitted reflected a poor understanding of the log's purpose. We made a commitment to focus on the logs and other aspects of technical writing this time around. We fell very short of our goal. Most projects still don't have log books, and few show real evidence of the students' ongoing thinking and working on their problem.

Now I'm wondering if we, the teachers, really understand the value of the writing. We seem to think it's important in September when we do our overall plan, but come November or December and our plans have gone by the wayside. Is this breakdown a function of time constraints and the enormous task? Lots of our kids have real problems writing a good sentence. Could it be a reflection of our own inexperience with writing and reflection? Or is it a combination of factors?

I've already approached our reading specialist and the folks from Johns Hopkins about setting up staff development about technical writing. I don't think we can solve this problem by just promising to do better next time. Our good intentions aren't getting us very far, and just feeling guilty is counterproductive.

I also think we need to make "writing across the curriculum"

more than a hollow catch-phrase. Our new standardized test, the Stanford 9, expects the students to be able to write in each area; and, not surprisingly, our kids aren't doing well. They've grown accustomed to multiple-choice tests and are generally not expected to defend a point of view on any subject, except maybe a novel or some other piece of literature. My kids are often annoyed when I try to insist that they must have an opinion about science questions. They've grown accustomed to being told what to think, even if they reject a lot of it. Lots of teachers are caught in the same mind-set. I cringe each time I hear things like, "just tell me what to teach" or "where's the kit?"

I've started to develop questions for the student evaluation of the science fair experience, and I'm giving a grade for it so they'll take it a bit more seriously; but I must confess that I'm really struggling to craft the questions so that they elicit meaningful answers. I'll spend most of the weekend thinking about this, as my classes will fill out the evaluations on Monday while I'm in the main building coordinating the fair. I'll share some of the questions and responses next week.

On a different note, our staff seems to be heading for a battle over student eligibility for extracurricular activities. I hope we really flesh it out and don't just make-nice and ignore it. There are a lot of issues that relate directly to our teaching and learning philosophies simmering just below the surface.

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***December 21, 1998***

***"We live from deadline to deadline constantly playing catch-up, rarely spending enough time on reflection."***

"Science Fair: The Event" is over, but "Science Fair: The Learning Experience" is just beginning. All of my classes completed an evaluation form which I haven't had time to read yet. They did seem to take it seriously though, and I'm anxious for a solid block of private, uninterrupted time to read their responses, a perfect fit for early mornings on break. My family should be grateful, as I tend to wake them up if I'm not busy, a trait I'm told I've inherited from my grandmother.

All of the "winners" in grades 6-8 were students from the Annex, where I teach. I was happy our students did well, but disappointed by the imbalance in the results. I think it points back to the fact that teachers agreed to standards that they did not really support. The judging was very close, and if students did not do a log book or failed to list their references on the board, they could not win. Either of those omissions could cost a student four points, a combination could be up to eight.

I have decided to present teachers with the judges' scoring sheets for their students' projects. If the data speaks for itself, I'm hopeful that we can have a substantive discussion of our future approach to the fair. I'm also going to write up a summary of my

students' responses to the evaluation form, which I'll distribute in advance.

I have a great deal of respect for the teachers I work with, and yet their failure to question or speak up when they find something unrealistic or disagree continues to plague our work.

Time is always our biggest enemy. We live from deadline to deadline constantly playing catch-up, rarely spending enough time on reflection. My sense of this problem is particularly acute this term because of my experience last summer.

In July I was part of a three-person team who designed and implemented a summer enrichment program called TAPS (Technology-Assisted Problem Solving). We were scheduled to meet at least an hour a day for planning and reflection. We usually E-mailed each other as well, and all of this communication was for a half-day, three-week program which serviced only 40 kids! Contrast this experience with our daily load of 1100 students and monthly meetings that are never fully attended because folks teach more than one subject and have other pulls on their time. If the stakes weren't so high, it would be rather amusing that we expect to effect change with so little opportunity to plan and refine our work.

Another obstacle is the move away from specialization. Because teachers teach more than one major subject they get pulled in different directions. I teach science only, so my focus is squarely on science. I work hard to make cross-curricular connections, but I'm not responsible for math portfolios or writing prompts. I can't help wondering if our stated mission to "teach children not subjects" while admirable in its intent, has resulted in less focus and more fragmentation, in reality.



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There must be a happy medium where we can achieve maximum focus on content without losing sight of the whole student or losing the hearts and minds of our staff. Of course, I'm inching my way toward the obvious need to reduce teacher-to-student ratios. It is the single reform that everyone can agree results in increased student achievement. However, it costs so much money, and that is always the bottom line when you teach children who get lip service rather than a serious commitment from their government. I'd better not start thinking about government priorities now, not this week, or I'll climb up on my soapbox and really start ranting and raving.

We had report card conferences for three afternoons this week, and our turnout was impressive. While I enjoyed talking to the parents of my successful students, I was especially pleased that I had the chance to meet so many parents of struggling students.

I had an assignment all ready for students who failed to meet the science fair requirements, and the parents were very willing to sign off and support my efforts to get their children to take responsibility for the missing work. The completed work is due as soon as we return from our holiday break. I'm optimistic that most of the families will make sure the work gets done. It's not the kind of assignment that would get done without a face-to-face discussion.

Being able to meet folks and explain our program made all the difference. Parents could sense that my intent wasn't to punish but to give students another a chance, and they responded in kind.

***January 11, 1999***

***Student feedback sparks an insight: Model a complete science fair project at the beginning of the year.***

After welcoming all the students back from the holidays we shared a few highlights about how we'd spent our vacations, and then we dug back into our work.

For the seventh graders that meant beginning in earnest to plan our approach to the visits of primary kids to our mini-museum. Since my students will be the docents, I thought they needed to plan like teachers, so I introduced them to the Quinn 6. The Quinn 6 was developed by Juli Quinn of Freeducation in Seal Beach, California and goes like this:

-What are you teaching?
-Why are you teaching it?
-How are you teaching it?
-Why are you teaching it that way?
-How will you know they're getting it?
-How will they know they're getting it?

Before the break the kids chose their lesson and book topics along with their teams. This week, using the Quinn 6, we talked about their focus questions, timelines, and division of responsibilities in their groups.

We talked about the ways they could get started, and they began to research their topics. Next week they'll give status reports, and I'll have them list their focus questions and their responses to the six questions. It's been interesting to have a conversation with students about how you design a good lesson. I'm anxious to see what they design. They've already contributed some wonderful ideas about the use of puppets and music to teach about marine life. ( On a related note, I got a carpet showroom to donate carpet squares, so we now have comfortable seating for our guests!)

The eighth graders just started a new unit - the pilot program on Catastrophic Events that I was trained in at the Smithsonian in late October. I'm not used to teaching lessons exactly the way they're written, so I'm feeling a little awkward. However, I think the model really builds a solid conceptual base, and I made a commitment to the author, so I'll forge ahead.

The kids like the materials and gave me some good feedback about the initial activities. They were given inflatable globes and colored dots which represented volcanoes, tornadoes, hurricanes, and earthquakes. Working in teams, they were supposed to label the globes with the dots, indicating where the events occurred most frequently. They had difficulty working with physical maps because they've had very little experience with them. Is geography a lost subject? Their lack of direct experience with most of these catastrophic events contributed to their shaky foundations as well. I expected them to remember Hurricane Mitch, but many did not, even though they have family in Puerto Rico.

They enjoyed choosing their anchor or culminating projects. I posted a list of possible events and also said they could come up with one of their own. Each student picked three, and then we

broke into groups according to common interests. Tomorrow, I'll work on a schedule that balances our time in the weeks ahead among labs, inquiry lessons, and group work. Kids asked for a frame to help them plan the research and anchor projects and presentations.

I just finished reading the 165 science fair evaluations my students submitted, and I've gotten some real insights from them. Over 30 of them wrote about feeling too rushed this year, and most were my more disciplined students. On the question of log books, they were split pretty evenly between those who found them helpful and those who felt they were just a chore.

Research was an almost universal sore point, and one girl made the point that "looking for information was most difficult, especially if the topic was weird or odd." Since I push the kids to pick problems that they're interested in and not just the same old thing out of a list, lots of them were in fact harder to research.

Along the same lines, lots of students expressed a need for help in knowing where they might find information, what keywords would be successful. I need to hash this out with colleagues and the kids. Where does it pass over from guiding to spoon feeding? One student asked for a list of books; and I know I'm not going there as I already provide tons of books, magazines, and seven wired computers!

The metric system has been a cause of frustration for years; and now that I asked them, the students said a conversion chart would help, along with a list of the metric and non-metric measurement words. Because many students come from homes where English is a second language, it was very shortsighted of me to think they knew that "teaspoon," for example, was a measurement word.

We've been spending all of our time making sure they knew



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the metric prefixes and their meanings, when the focus must really be on basic vocabulary and conversions! One student asked me to make up a song or rhyme to help with remembering! This kid knows how to make me smile. I've never actually had a request for one of my weird mnemonics before.

Another student said, "You should start the year by modeling a complete science fair project which we could all judge with the rubric so that we'd have a clear picture of what you wanted." Up to now, I've been focusing in on a piece at a time, like problem one week and research the next. Apparently, this is too fragmented for some, so I'll take that suggestion and try it out.

Finally, it was painfully clear that most students, even the science fair winners, were still fuzzy on the difference between dependent and independent variables. Here again, I think the scheduling contributed to the confusion. Students need lots of experience with variables to understand how to control and/or manipulate them in experiments. Our schedule this year was too rushed.

I'm anxious to share these ideas with my fellow science teachers and with my classes. I think it's critical that they see some changes made based on their helpful feedback. I hate when I get asked for my input and then nothing changes, and I know they do too. I think I'll write my summary up and give it to them so they'll be able to remind me of my promises even when I'm pressed for time.

I just downloaded some alternative ways to approach science fairs and the scientific process, but I haven't had time to study them yet. Next weekend I'm scheduled to present my professional portfolio at an Annenberg conference, and as you might have guessed, my focus for discussion will revolve around the science fair and its educational merits.

*January 18, 1999*

***Deb longs for a time when teachers and parents could examine student work together.***

Monday morning I went to school with my summary of the students' science fair feedback in hand. I kept it to one page and distributed it to all my classes. It took about a half hour or so to go over the sheet, and it was a little frustrating. Most kids said nothing. Was it because they didn't care, or was it because they're not sure I really care? This dilemma rears its head constantly among adults and students as they continually make decisions about whether to engage in conversations, in work, in life.

I think this semiconscious disengagement is one of the biggest problems we face in our schools. If our students and their parents would speak up more, and if we would really listen - I realize these are big if's - I think we'd see some dramatic developments in terms of learning and educational reform.

What would it take to get this conversation rolling? Why aren't we trying to have these discussions? What do we have to lose? I don't pretend to have the answers to these questions, but I can't see how the schools will really change without them.

I'm not content to leave those questions dangling in the air like empty rhetoric, so I kept plugging in all five classes. I did get some responses, and I'll point out classroom changes as I make them to remind my students that what we're doing is based on their ideas.

I want them to feel empowered. I want them to feel they can take on the world, the way I did at their age - the way I still do.

In terms of the adults who feel powerless, I'd like to see us looking at student work with parents. I'm not talking about report cards or test scores but really looking at assignments and peeling them back to find the reasons for doing them and for the work we're getting from students, figuring out together what makes an *A* an *A* or why one approach makes more sense than another.

These discussions hardly ever happen, at least not in urban, public schools. I had to become a teacher to have them. As an active parent I got to sell cupcakes and chaperone trips. When I asked for more involvement, I got to tutor a small group on my day off, but nobody really wanted to talk about learning or pedagogy with a parent.

So now I'm on the other side of the table, and I still I hate report card conferences. They are so shallow, so superficial. "Your child didn't complete this or that," or "Your child is wonderful...any questions?" The only benefit of the conferences is the human contact you try to make for your 5-7 minutes. I shake hands, make eye contact, talk about my availability every morning and my willingness to receive phone calls, but it's not enough. The hierarchy has been in place for far too long. It's "us and them," and we have the power, the power to pass or fail, to approve or disapprove. Add language and cultural barriers, mix with a dose of economic disadvantage, and is it any wonder we don't really talk?

So where does all this leave me? I'm going to New York this afternoon for three days of focus on my professional portfolio and my personal growth as an educator. I feel good about the progress I've made in the last three years - not complacent, but good. How-

ever, sitting down to write this diary has made me aware of the section that isn't there, the missing piece in my portfolio - the extension of the conversation to parents. Ouch!

I'm glad I'll be with Annenberg coaches this weekend. The discussions always push my thinking, and I'll be looking for ways to open the conversation with parents. I'm sure I'll come back with some initial strategies. Actually, I proposed using a "protocol" to look at student work in our school council once, but we never did it, and I didn't re-raise it. That seems like a good place to start.

## *January 25, 1999*

***Deb's presentation of her professional portfolio at a national seminar forces some deep reflection.***

Last weekend I presented my professional portfolio at a seminar sponsored by the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) of the Annenberg Institute. I made the commitment to keep a portfolio during my training as a Critical Friends' coach. I wasn't really sure what it meant, but tracking my own professional growth seemed like a worthwhile task.

I wish I could say that I systematically collected samples of my work and the corresponding student work over the past three years. I wish I'd been keeping this MiddleWeb diary over that same period of time. I wish I'd been reflecting about my work each step of the way. However, like most presenters, I had not.

Instead I had copies of assignments, grant applications, test papers, agendas, you name it - in boxes, in piles, in files, on disk. As the deadline grew closer the need to organize and reflect loomed large.

Annenberg had given us the charge of charting our own course. No template was provided. There was no surefire way to get an *A*. In fact there was no grade, just a clear directive to set goals and measure your progress in relation to them. It wasn't supposed to be a scrapbook, or a picture-perfect success story, rather it was meant to reflect your real efforts to grow as an educator so your students

could achieve more. It was to be a work in progress, and we were to select one section or "slice" along with a question which we would share with a small group at the seminar.

Just like my students who want to know "what's going to be on the test," I grew increasingly anxious as I struggled to do "it" right. I finally settled on sections based on my major areas of work with my goals and educational philosophy as an introduction.

Putting together the pieces of my work - the artifacts - was like assembling a giant jigsaw puzzle whose frame kept shifting. Once I decided to include a piece, I needed to write a reflection which explained what it was, why it was important, how it reflected my goals, what my next steps were, and what questions I still had about this area. This was really hard work. At the same time, it was incredibly rewarding. I got the chance to reconstruct my work and reflect on it.

I was at the computer day and night with piles all around. Our study was off-limits to my husband and dog, because what looked like an old envelope to them could very well be an artifact to me! My children called from college and noticed that I sounded busy. Little did they know I was crazed. I wanted to cease doing anything else. Once I started there was no stopping me. My 3-inch binder was beginning to bulge! It was time to weed things out and take another look.

I finally decided to focus my slice on our school's science fair process and the superficial buy-in of some of my fellow teachers. As the science leader I had been responsible for most of this work, and I wanted to dig deep and figure out what had gone wrong and why.

At the conference I got to present my slice to a group of six educators. They read the material carefully, listened to my overview,

and asked clarifying questions. An Annenberg staff member facilitated the discussion and after a time called for the next stage in the protocol or process we were using.

Now it was time for the group to discuss what they heard and saw. It was also a time to say what they thought might be missing, what they didn't hear, etc. These comments and questions are always a revelation. Here are these people who barely know you, who don't know your work, colleagues, or kids, and yet they can cut to the chase and move your thinking to another level. They don't fix your work, and they don't try to fix you; they just help you look at your own process and product.

Finally, you get to say what you're thinking after hearing their discussion. You don't answer their questions or offer explanations. Instead you try to identify next steps and questions to push the work.

As I sat and listened I began to see why I wasn't totally comfortable with my question. I hadn't gone deeply enough. My real dilemma was about the lack of accountability for our science fair work in particular and our science work in general. Questions like "What happens if folks agree to require student logs and then don't do them?" or "Why isn't attendance at the teacher meetings required?" left me speechless. It became clear that if we had all really taken ownership then we'd have felt a need to either perform or explain why we hadn't.

The missing accountability raised administrative questions, but it also pointed back in my direction. When my kids don't perform, I ask them why, or I ask them what they didn't understand. When my peers don't follow through I feel bad or annoyed and let it go. Is this because it's not my place, or because I don't want to hear

their answers? I know it's more the latter. Their answers will probably reveal that I/we haven't been sharing ownership for the work. Even though increasing our capacity to do things is one of my goals for the reform work, I haven't applied it to the science department.

The science department is meeting on Tuesday afternoon, and I'm not really sure how it will go, but I am looking forward to a more honest discussion of the work and my leadership. I'm going to write a short prompt and some questions tonight which should prepare folks for the topic. I don't want it to be a surprise to anyone. I also don't want it to be a session where folks apologize or pat me on the back for a job well done. We've all done a lot of good science work, but we've fallen down, too. It's not about us as individuals, it's about moving our thinking in order to improve our work with the kids.

If I hadn't done my portfolio, if I hadn't had the benefit of this deep reflection and discussion, I'd be moving on to the next task, putting the science fair behind me until next year. I'm looking forward to Tuesday's discussion. We work too hard and care about the kids too much to "make nice" and avoid these questions.

I hope to continue to document my thinking and growth, but I don't know if I'll keep updating my portfolio. Putting it together was both a luxury and a necessity, given the seminar deadline. I'm glad that being in a Critical Friends Group will keep the lessons and process going even if the binder doesn't.

## February 1, 1999

***"Do tests measure their intelligence or their experience?" is one of the questions begging for resolution.***

**Teaching to the test.** The phrase has an almost criminal ring to it, but is it fair to test things that haven't been taught?

The testing dilemma reared its ugly head throughout Philadelphia again this week. Our Sunday paper, *The Inquirer*, announced last year's school-by-school state test scores in grades 5, 8, and 11. The report was followed by a week's worth of planning before we give this year's test - next week.

Testing is a thorny problem. I want my kids to "show what they know" and do well on the tests. I want them to be prepared to compete in the real world. I want lots of things for them, and I strive to set high standards to help them achieve them, **but** then I think about Linda Darling Hammond.

About six years ago I went to a Saturday meeting where Dr. Hammond was speaking about the history of standardized testing. She was very informative and made solid points about tests that were designed to maintain the current power structure. She spoke of tests that were more about where you came from than your ability to think and learn.

As I renew my focus on explicit test preparation, I am struck by her remarks and question tests that don't deal with specific concepts, only vocabulary. Specifically, I'm thinking about a food

web example I used with my seventh graders. They got hung up on the word "shrub" and lost confidence before they even got to the point of the question. Only two of my kids knew what a shrub was, two out of 66! Once it was explained, most could figure out the web relationships.

If you don't have a garden or a lawn, where do you learn words like "shrub" or "snapdragon"? A few years ago my kids had a question that asked them to find the relationship which was analogous to that of a bee and a flower, but no one knew that a snapdragon was a flower, so they all got it wrong. Do questions like these gauge their intelligence or their experience?

In a similar vein, two of my girls were testing potato chips to do a fat comparison last month, and they brought in two kinds of popcorn. When I asked where the chips were, they pointed to the popcorn. These are serious students. They stopped at the store to get the snacks in question and still managed to arrive by 7:30 am to conduct their experiment. They thought all snacks were chips!

How do you test fairly when large numbers of children come from homes where English is rarely spoken? How do you teach responsibly when there are layers of misunderstanding you can't even imagine?

We discussed this in our Critical Friends Group meeting on Monday, and one member suggested that all of our staff members needed training in ESOL (English as a Second Language) strategies. I wholeheartedly agree and have already asked that a presentation be done at our next Small Learning Community meeting. In the meantime though, I'm trying to stress problem-solving strategies with my kids. I want them to take the tests and themselves seriously. The real question is when will the test makers take the task of developing an equitable test seriously?

On another note, I attended a design and technology workshop today. The session was fantastic! We learned about linkages, and we constructed models in response to design challenges that the leaders posed. Most of the materials we used were inexpensive or recycled, so I know I can do this in my classroom.

One of the leaders talked briefly about failure as a place to begin in a technology class. He said that instead of "dragging the horse to water," we should be making the horses thirsty. I left today's meeting very thirsty and anxious for more! I think my kids will feel the same way.

Design is a "cross-cutting competency" in our district's curriculum framework, and according to today's presentation, it touches on more than half of our standards. We will hold our second annual Invention Convention this spring, and I'm attending these workshops to learn new ways to integrate this component into my classes and our school.

This week was a busy one, but my principal and I did speak briefly about looking at student work with parents. We'll develop a timetable this week for involving others and setting the process in motion. Now that the principal's been permanently appointed, we don't have to put things on hold. What a relief!

***February 8, 1999***

***"The political football game of public education is at the last down, with charters, vouchers, and still more testing waiting on the sidelines."***

This week I administered four sections of math tests to a group of special education eighth graders. Despite the accommodations and despite my best shot at making them feel comfortable, it was a royal drag! I read the directions and many of the problems for them, but it was clear that in general they had no idea how to proceed.

Open-ended, multi-step problems were the most worrisome. Even when they did do some calculations, they had little idea of how to articulate their thinking. We were scheduled to test for 80 minutes but were told to give the students extra time if they needed it. After two hours and forty-five minutes, some of my kids were still trying. One boy in particular, seemed almost paralyzed. He was so afraid of making a mistake that he was spending an average of 15 minutes per example.

At one point on the second day, a girl asked me if she was supposed to complete a page that had the formula for *pi* on it. Her inability to recognize that it was only a direction was the last straw for me. I felt like the agent of a cruel joke at the children's expense! Why are they being tested at grade level when it's been well docu-

mented that they cannot perform at that level? Who benefits from these results? Certainly not the kids!

Next week I'll be giving the reading tests, and since it's a reading test, I won't be able to read it for them. I can see their self-esteem plummeting now.

In the middle of this dilemma, I was sent a copy of "The Great Accountability Fallacy" by Robert Evans. His commentary was being published in the current edition of *Education Week* and was also published on the Annenberg coaches' listserv.

Mr. Evans examines "the rising controversy over 'high stakes' testing" in his essay. Needless to say, this was already my burning issue of the week! In no time at all, I was off and running. Arguments about accountability are a pet peeve of mine. I'm sick to death of people spending millions to determine who's really more or less at fault while our schools and children suffer. The political football game of public education is at the last down, with charters, vouchers, and still more testing waiting on the sidelines.

When people finally admit that its an all-sided problem, it's like *DUH...no fooling?* For me the real question is about when and how we're going to build a mass movement in support of our public school kids. Sustained political pressure from public school parents and their allies is the only hope our kids have, but before we stand together, we have to listen and talk together. I seem to be right back at square one, the square where I'm looking for ways to engage parents in meaningful discussions...hmmm.

Our council is meeting on Tuesday night; using protocols to examine student work with parents is on the agenda. It's only a step, but it's one that is long overdue.

On a related, but slightly different note, my eldest began student teaching two weeks ago. I'm very proud of his commitment and his desire to "make a difference," but I'm also a worried mom who knows a lot of the pitfalls that lie ahead.

Today he got his first quizzes back, and the results were less than glowing. He got the uneven results that drive us all crazy, the A's and the D's-F's with barely a paper in between. Tonight we had a conversation about differentiated instruction, about teaching for all layers and not just the highest or lowest common denominator. I'm in middle school science and he's in high school history, but we're both teaching students with many of the same problems, and I wish I had more answers to share for my son's and my students' sakes.

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***February 15, 1999***

***Administering reading tests to frustrated special education students prompts Deb to "pop two Advils."***

Testing is done for the time being. Watching the special education students try to take the reading sections was a headache waiting to happen. (See last week's entry.) One boy, a non-reader, finished close to 200 multiple-choice questions in fifteen minutes! He made a pattern on his answer sheet and called it a day.

When I asked him to try the open-ended questions, he looked up at me with tears in his eyes. Needless to say, I wanted to share a few choice sentiments with the "powers that be" right about then!

Another student told me he couldn't do any more after the first seven items. He explained how he was scanning the answers to see if he could find the same words in the text. He couldn't read them, but he just might spot them. If he found a match, he figured it was the right answer. I was impressed by his strategy and respected his recognition of the futility of this exercise.

The counselor asked kids to write something about the open-ended questions in order to receive "credit," and because they wanted to please us so much, they did. At that point, I popped two Advils and asked them if they wanted to help me stuff envelopes.

After the testing period was over I invited the group to watch ANTZ with me during lunch. I thought they had earned a break after what was essentially an abusive experience.

All of this testing made me think about some reading I did last week about brain research and learning. It was *Educational Leadership* from last November, and the article was called, "Teach Me, Teach My Brain: A Call for Differentiated Classrooms" by Carol Ann Tomlinson and M. Layne Kalbfleisch.

Ever since my father had a benign brain tumor removed about 16 years ago, I've been fascinated by the brain and the ways we learn and remember things. After the surgery, my Dad would/could only speak Italian, at first, and it was a shocker to me. His long-term memory came back days before his short-term did. I didn't even know he was fluent in Italian, and here he was asking me questions and getting upset when I didn't answer!

In any case, while I still haven't learned Italian, I have taken to reading brain research in semi-diluted form. One of the articles I read was talking about the release of chemicals that block learning. According to the authors, when we feel threatened for any reason, our bodies produce chemicals to protect us from the real or perceived threat.

I thought about all the reasons a child might feel unsafe in school from bona fide physical problems to peer pressure, learning problems, and/or language barriers. Finally, I considered the additional layers presented by racial, economic, gender, and age differences, and I began to marvel that we get through to each other at all!

Right about now I felt like my own head was about to explode from an overload, but I promised myself to work on being more explicitly welcoming the next day. I already greet everyone in the morning, but now I'm making sure to get out in the hall before every class comes in the room. The kids usually treat me like I'm crazed in September, but you can tell they get into it after a few

weeks. They comment on my bizarre earrings, and it does make for an easier transition into our class work.

It's too soon to say if this small step is making a difference yet, but it did refocus me on the need for a tone of decency throughout the school. Now that testing's over I'm going to talk about this with my kids and co-workers. Sure, some will groan and think I've really gone 'round the bend,' but it just might open some doors; we'll see.

A few separate notes this week - First, I went to a sneak preview of *October Sky* last Saturday night. It's about independent learning, succeeding in the face of obstacles, a teacher who inspires kids, all the stuff that reminds you of why you teach. It also includes a science fair, but the whole audience clapped at the end; and they couldn't all have been science teachers or I would've recognized someone!

Second, on a more personal note, my son, the student teacher, remarked in an offhand way that he'd told his supervisor about how I was an excellent resource for him and how we really talked things over. This reminded me of why I love being a mom and how even though I had to wait for twenty-three and a half years for that feedback, it still felt really good!

And finally, my "Ask the Girls" group meets after school on Fridays. It's a good way to end the week, because it means I always go home on a positive note. We've been building these little wooden cars for a few weeks using LINKX materials. Well the word has spread, and my group of 8 has become 20. The girls are so involved with the sawing, drilling, and assembling that there's not a lot of talk going on, but the energy in the room is amazing!

I can't wait to get the conversation going to see what the girls have to say about this experience. I may videotape them next week

as part of my documentation for Wellesley and my own school. I know they're having fun, but I really want to figure out together why it's been such a powerful activity. We also need to plan our Women's History Month activities, including our annual SHERO (female hero) celebration. March is almost here!

***February 22, 1999***

***The cold eye of a video camera forces Deb to revise a science lab lesson in midstream.***

This week was rather unusual. It all started on Monday, when I won a trip to Washington, D.C., at a hockey game. I'm not the athletic type, but I was at the game with a lot of my students, and I thought all the chaperones were going to compete in this contest. I was pretty surprised when I found myself, alone on the ice, under the spotlight in front of 12,000-plus spectators. It was pure beginner's luck when my first shot won the D.C. trip. My next shot missed the puck completely! The kids were thrilled, I was amazed, and I wisely decided to end my hockey career as quickly as it had started.

On Tuesday, I was visited by a film crew from Annenberg, so I was back in the spotlight again. They taped me teaching a science lab and did an interview with me, and then they recorded my Critical Friends Group discussing my concerns about the shortcomings of the taped lesson.

At my CFG meeting we used the Tuning Protocol to peel away the layers of my lesson and the students' response to it. I was concerned that the kids were experiencing lots of hands-on, but not enough minds-on. I felt they were missing the connections to the concepts imbedded in the lab. Find out more about tuning protocols at: >http://www.essentialschools.org/pubs/horace/13/v13n2.html<

I wish I could say that my CFG unearthed some really mysterious obstacles in my classroom, but in fact it was pretty basic stuff. On the one hand, I was concerned about my students' lack of reflection, while on the other hand, I rushed them through the lab like a herd of cattle being driven to market.

Listening to my peers as they raised questions about whether the students had written down their thoughts and discussed them in their groups - before I hit them with my questions - was a little unsettling. It was clear to me that I had neglected to build in reflection time or any of the teaching devices that I know facilitate student thinking. Even allowing for my nervousness about being filmed, it was clear that I'd goofed.

When it came time for my response to their feedback, I expressed my intention to turn the lesson around the next day. I said I'd build reflection in when I taught my second class. I decided to do some prewriting as well as some more review of the previous lab before we started the next one.

It was an unusual opportunity to implement the feedback in midstream. In most instances, by the time you get the work tuned you've moved on and have to wait until the next year to teach a concept or lesson again.

The camera crew decided to film again the next day. They wanted to see what changes I would make and whether the students would respond differently.

I wasn't as nervous about the cameras on the second day, but it was the new focus on reflection that made the biggest difference. I slowed down, asked questions, and waited for answers. If the answers didn't come, I rephrased or repeated the questions.



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Even though the second taping was of my most difficult group of eighth graders, it was great! The kids were motivated (the cameras helped here). They made sketches, asked questions of their own, formulated hypotheses, and even made reference to comments I had made five days earlier.

I'm not saying I'll never rush a lesson again, especially if the camera's running, but I sure did learn a big lesson about setting a reflective tone. I was saying all the right things, "talking the talk," but I sure wasn't "walking the walk." Ugh.

I am struck again by how we often blame others - generally the kids - first and only after serious reflection look at our role in the process of teaching and learning. Our assumption is that we covered the material and that they didn't get it for some reason like lack of motivation, or inattentiveness. Is it just human nature to want to blame the other guy? Is it always easier for adults to blame kids?

As usual, going through a fine tuning of my work was both humbling and exhilarating. It reminded me of a metaphor that had been shared with me in a recent E-mail. The metaphor talked about professional development as if it were the process of polishing a stone. We all have our rough edges, and too often we act like it's only the students who need the polishing.

I'm grateful that I have a context, a CFG, to help me smooth over my rough spots. I don't ever want to return to the isolation I felt during my first few years as a teacher in a self-contained classroom. I guess what I'm recognizing for the umpteenth time is that despite the best of intentions, you can't improve your work alone. You need those extra eyes to clearly see the stuff that's right there in front of you.

Speaking of reflection, I wrote up some focus questions for my "Ask the Girls" group. I'm hoping they'll answer the questions in their journals outside of our meeting time. I asked them things about why they liked building the cars so much and how they might respond to people who think tools and building are for "boys only." I'm anxious to see what they have to say, and after my recent CFG experience, I'm building in a way for them to exercise their voices.

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***March 1, 1999***

***Critical Friends Groups from across the city gather to explore the meaning of professional growth.***

This was a very busy week. Our Critical Friends Group (CFG) Winter Forum was held Tuesday after school. About 100 teachers from all over the city attended. It was great to see how CFG's are growing!

We started the event with a text-based discussion of a Grant Wiggins' article, "The Futility of Trying to Teach Everything of Importance" from the November '89 issue of *Educational Leadership.* Participants broke into six discussion circles and spent the first hour of the forum talking about the issues raised by Wiggins and the implications for our schools and our classrooms.

I couldn't participate because I was running around with my student helpers, registering latecomers, making sure things were running smoothly, and taking pictures. I'm anxious to hear about the discussions from others.

Next on the program were various sessions about our work. There were presentations on Lit Circles, Teacher Collaboration, Rubrics, Socratic Seminar, and Professional Portfolios. In our session, we formed a panel and shared pieces of the professional portfolios we recently presented at the Annenberg conference. We each gave a brief overview of the twists and turns we'd been through in the course of our portfolio development.

We discussed the importance of goals by which we could measure our professional growth. We stressed the need to include student work to document and authenticate our progress toward our goals. And finally, we urged our audience to collaborate with either their CFG as a whole, or with a peer coach. None of us could imagine assembling a portfolio in isolation from other like-minded colleagues.

The two questions that our participants kept raising were: "What should we put in our portfolios?" and "Why are we doing this anyway?" These are *the* questions, after all. We kept raising them as our presentation deadline got closer and closer.

The freedom to design your own learning goals goes hand in hand with the responsibility for personal and professional growth, and documentation. While these ideas seem quite heady in the abstract, they grow extremely weighty in the concrete. At a certain point, I know I wanted someone from on high at Annenberg to dictate what *my* requirements were, and what *their* expectations were, as well.

We all found it very difficult to break free from the "How do I pass this test with flying colors?" mentality. Putting meat on the bones of this lifelong learner frame continues to be both difficult and rewarding. I hope we were successful in conveying to our audience the personal value we got from our experiences.

After the second session we filled out reflection sheets and sat down to a cold supper in the school cafeteria. We called for a city-wide coaches' meeting in early April and announced the impending arrival of an IBM-sponsored website for city-wide CFG discussions.

The next morning it was back to CPI (Continuous Practice Improvement professional development model) for me. A colleague



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from our school was supposed to visit me for three days of sharing and observation of technology integration. This was my 11th or 12th round of visits, but it was my first unsuccessful pairing. My colleague took a personal day on the second day of the three-day cycle! On the two days when he was supposed to be observing my teaching, he left the room every time I turned around.

I need to think more about why this visit didn't work. I need to examine what I might have done differently to make it more successful, but I must admit that at this point, I feel my partner just wasn't ready. I think both of us need to be prepared to learn in these situations. Maybe it was just a case of too much, too soon. Maybe he just felt too overwhelmed by the technology. We teach the same kids, although he teaches social studies. We have always had a friendly relationship. I don't know. I just know it didn't feel right, and we never accomplished much of anything in terms of concrete applications for his classroom.

I'll have to discuss this with our tech facilitator. She's in the CFG with me, and I think we'll be able to salvage something from this experience for everyone concerned. Maybe we need to write some generalizeable lessons about teaching and technology use. I always feel like I can learn from other teachers no matter what the subject or grade level. To me, good teaching is good teaching.

On Wednesday afternoon we had our first planning session for next summer's enrichment program. I can't believe it's already time to plan for July, but the budget's due next month. We hope to hold TAPS II (Technology Assisted Problem Solving II) from July 6th to the 23rd. We want to bump it up from three resident teachers, nine visiting teachers, and 45 kids, to seven residents, 21 visitors, and 80 kids.

As soon as the resident teachers are identified we can begin planning in earnest. I'm hoping we can pilot active research projects with the kids. Our district is planning to require exit projects in grades 4, 8, and 12 next year. With that graduation requirement in mind, I've been reading, *Teaching Middle School Students to Be Active Researchers* by Judith M. Zorfass and Harriet Copel.

I'm excited by the possibilities that exit projects present, but I know how much work science fair projects require, and these new projects are supposed to be cross-curricular and service-oriented too! It seems to me that this type of thing should be phased in over a three-year period rather than imposed as a regulation all in one year. But, as usual, no one's asking teachers, parents or students.

Finally, my grades were due today. I always feel a little panicky when my second period grades go in each February. I can almost hear the time rushing by, and I become acutely aware of how much more I want to accomplish before June rolls around.

My eighth graders started receiving high school acceptance letters today, and my seventh graders found out that social promotion is over and summer school will be held this year. Both of these developments should lead to an interesting spring.

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***March 8, 1999***

***Can Central East develop a proactive response to the annual spring breakdown in student behavior and teacher morale?***

This week I feel a tremendous need to think about the anger and violence that has been erupting at our school. We don't usually have fights, but for the last couple of weeks there have been fights happening after school and even a few times inside either building. Yesterday, two girls jumped up in one of my classes and started going through standard pre-fighting posturing. I stopped it but was very disturbed by how fast it happened and by what I knew was coming next.

Do we chalk it up to the changing weather, the full moon, these kids today? These questions and comments don't cut it for me, but I'm not sure what does either. When I tried to pose the question about whether the change in weather or our declining energy levels at this time of year had precipitated the shift in student behavior, it was not taken kindly by a few of my peers.

I don't choose to go into the crackdown, prison guard mentality. I cringe when teachers talk about the kids like we're the guards and they're the mob or the inmates. Aside from the obvious problems this approach reflects in terms of our views of the kids, it also seems to me that this mentality looks at the rest of the year as something to endure and get through as opposed to three and a half more months of learning possibilities.

After eleven springs I want something more. I want a proactive response to this annual dilemma. I also want an understanding that's multidimensional and addresses the real feelings of all concerned.

Maybe it's because I grew up in a neighborhood where "saving face" was important, but I understood what went on in my room yesterday. I understood when one of my girls cried and said, "I can't let anybody talk to me like that!" I can even hear my own mother echoed when parents tell their kids to fight back. So what do I do?

On an individual basis I spoke to Jenna and we discussed what being a "punk" is and what it isn't. We talked about alternative ways to deal with tense situations, but I understood her conflicted feelings.

We can't just say, "tell the teacher" because that's unrealistic on a number of levels. First of all, nobody likes a tattletale, including teachers; and secondly, these kids have to be able to live in their peer group both inside and outside of school.

I hear myself talking to kids about how times have changed and about how fighting doesn't solve anything. I talk about how foolish it is when friends hurt friends. I say all the things we say in these situations, and yet I feel hollow inside. It's this gut feeling and the rising incidence of fights that's disturbing me now.

I also wonder how the parents feel. Are they confused too? I know it was confusing to me when my kids were coming up. I didn't want them to fight, but I didn't want them to be seen as wimps either. As a parent, I counted on the school's protection of my kids, but that didn't always stop the bullies, especially on the way home from school.

At one point, my mother intervened and told my then-6th-grade daughter to hit a particular girl back as hard as she could. My



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daughter took her advice and the girl left her alone after that. Does that mean fighting solves conflicts? I don't think so, but I wouldn't let someone hit me without hitting them back. This is so contradictory for me, and I know it is for the kids and their families too.

So what do we do? Do we put a program into place that teaches kids about conflict resolution? We certainly seem to need one. Some kids have a lot of rage. They wear it to school and the slightest bump or look is enough to set it off. Do we set up special sessions to get them help with anger management?

Setting up such a program and campaign requires time, training, and materials. It means an all-out effort with teachers, staff, parents, and students. It can't just be a "we don't do that here" kind of thing, and it can't just be a reaction to fighting in the spring.

It means examining our tone in dealing with the kids and parents too. Is a "tone of decency" being practiced in all of our dealings with each other or does sarcasm creep into our voices when we're tired or frustrated? Are we setting the tone in our school's halls or are we too tired to step outside the door between classes because our contract says we're not obliged to act as hall monitors?

Would our program also address the glamorized violence in our culture? Look at all the movies, TV shows, and video games that are out there. The other day, a few of my boys were talking to me about computer games that are banned. They said one game gives bonus points for running over a pregnant woman! Who designs and markets these games; and if they're banned, why have my kids seen them?

I know some schools teach anti-violence and anti-bullying units. Today someone from Australia posted a website on Middle-L listserv >http://www.OntheNet.com.au/~townsend/anti-bullying.htm< I'm going to check it out and suggest that my students do so as well.

Clearly, we need a full discussion of these problems, and I'm not so naïve as to think we'll resolve this for this year, but I'm not willing to keep keeping the lid on in the spring. Luckily, we have a council meeting on Tuesday and an all-day staff meeting on the 16th. Maybe I'll write a variation on this entry to share with my colleagues... ✍

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***March 15, 1999***

***A district diversity conference prompts "a pretty meaty discussion about the ways we pigeonhole our students."***

The "All Means ALL" conference on diversity was held this weekend. The School District of Philadelphia sponsored the conference. It was pretty impressive; about 800 people attended, and the schedule was full.

On Friday night I attended a session called "The Frames in Which We View Our Students," presented by Ann Bouie. Dr. Bouie led us through an interesting activity about the boxes we put our students and their families into before we even begin to teach.

The audience was divided into five groups of about eight persons each, and each group was assigned a task, without the other groups' knowledge. Group One was told to list adjectives which described society's views of poor families and people of color. Group Two was to list the schools' attitudes toward poor and minority students. Group Three was to round out the picture with the penal system's descriptive adjectives for the same groups.

Groups Four and Five were asked what the strengths of poor families and children were, and what poor parents' aspirations for their children were, respectively.

All the groups listed their attributes on chart paper so we could hang them around the room, compare lists, and discuss their content.

The similarities in the lists of the first three groups were alarming and all too real. The lists were full of words like *lazy, defensive,* and *dangerous.* Participants began to feel very uncomfortable with the overtly negative character of the lists and began to make comments that attempted to separate "us," the teachers, from our society and its educational and legal systems.

However, the handwriting was on the wall, both literally and figuratively, and we got down to a pretty meaty discussion about the ways we do, in fact, pigeonhole our students. Dr. Bouie talked at length about the well-intentioned views that we were schooled in - views that labeled our students as victims. She showed samples of student work from a variety of classrooms and asked if the work reflected a respectful or patronizing view of the children's abilities.

We contrasted the last two groups' charts, with their lists of positive attributes about students' families and their parents' dreams for them, with the treatment parents receive at our schools.

Dr. Bouie drove home the point that we cannot combat the bias and racism in our school systems until we are ready to own those pieces of the problem that we have perpetuated, sometimes with the best of intentions. For me, this lesson - while obvious - is never easy.

Beverly Tatum Daniel's book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* was one of the books that has helped me understand the impact of my "good" intentions in the classroom. Her book has forced me to rethink the makeup of my cooperative groups, for example.

In the past I always followed a formula to create groups that were balanced in terms of gender, race, and educational performance. In other words I tried to have picture-perfect groups.

I thought about the value of students from different backgrounds getting to know each other and support each other's learning. I didn't think about adolescence as a time when kids are beginning to feel the harsh stings of racism on the street. I hadn't recognized their need to support themselves by the safety of membership in their own groups. In the context of sexism, I know how much it means to me to work with like-minded women, yet I never compared my own experience and needs to the needs of my kids and their experiences with racism.

So what do my groups look like now? Sometimes they look pretty unbalanced to an outside viewer, because sometimes they're self-selected. Some groups are all-male, some all-female, some all African American, some mixed. In other cases, I group them and they comply. I no longer think there's a recipe for all situations.

I think the important thing - the thing Dr. Bouie was driving at - is the need to be open to looking at the possibility that I/we might be wrong in the ways we approach our students.

Today, I attended a session in the morning by the Deputy Superintendent of the Boston Public Schools, Bak Fun Wong. Mr. Wong talked about choices and shared many experiences from his long history in schools. One story he shared sticks out. He spoke of a young child, in first or second grade, who would not remove his coat despite requests and threats from the teacher. Mr. Wong was called in as the principal to force the child to comply with the teacher's request. However, Mr. Wong decided to get to know the child first, and when he did, he learned that the boy's mother was set to deliver twins. It seems the boy wanted to be ready to leave at a moment's notice.

This story was not told as an example of an unfeeling teacher's mistake, but rather as an example of the many small ways in which we misunderstand each other on a regular basis.

I rounded out my day with a session about Latino books where a librarian/storyteller was both entertaining and informative. I hope to add some of her titles to my classroom collection.

Finally, I attended "The African Heritage of Puerto Ricans" and learned that Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, the person responsible for the extensive collection of African American literature and history in the Harlem library was a Puerto Rican of African descent. I learned that Mr. Schomburg began assembling his collection because a teacher told him there was nothing to collect about African history and he was motivated to prove her wrong. Once again, I was struck by the powerful role we play for good or bad in the lives of our students.

On another note, a subcommittee of our school council is going to lead a discussion at our next meeting on the tone of decency and various peer mediation programs that are available for our school's use. So much to do, so little time... ✍

***March 22, 1999***

***In a large and busy school, faculty feel out of touch and "rarely have time to laugh and celebrate."***

Today was an inservice day for staff members. We started our morning with a baby shower breakfast for one of the gym teachers whose second daughter arrived a few weeks ago. It was a great way to welcome his new daughter while working some much-needed social time into our agenda.

Recently on the Middle-L listserv there's been a discussion about staff morale and its relationship to the size and structure of middle schools. I've been very interested in this topic as I've watched our school grow from one building with about 700 kids to two buildings with over 1000 kids and an ever-growing cast of staff members, 80+ at last count.

While there has been quite a lot written about the impact of large school populations on students, I haven't seen much about its effects on the adults who live and work in these large schools. A few years ago I was shocked to learn that folks at Olney High didn't even know their co-workers. I saw this anonymity as a significant piece of their overwhelming performance and morale breakdown.

Now I find that I no longer know everyone's name at CEM. It's really hard to get to know each other when we're all so busy. Not knowing each other personally has meant that we can't always rely on informal connections in our dealings with each other about

student problems. Before, we could just make a point of talking to a coach or club sponsor if we had a student-related concern. Now we need a policy to dictate our procedures.

About five years ago, we adopted the small learning community model (SLC) and created a "school within a school" identity, but what about the need for a whole school mentality or spirit? We now have separate commencements and 8th grade trips as well as assemblies. Where do we go next?

I like the SLC model because we really get to know our students, especially when we "loop" and teach the same group for two to three years. I like the fact that fewer kids slip through the cracks or pass through as unknowns. However, the downside is that while we get to know the kids, we do tend to get somewhat isolated from our colleagues in the other SLC's. Is this isolation inevitable?

Maybe we need ongoing team building activities at our monthly staff meetings and at our curricular meetings as well. Feeling out of touch seems to lead to misunderstandings. Add the fact that we rarely have time to laugh and celebrate with each other and it amounts to a potentially serious problem.

Finally, if I feel out of touch - and I'm on quite a few activities and the type who freely walks up to new folks and talks to them - how must it feel for the shy teacher or the newcomer?

My principal and I were E-mailing about this the other day and came up with the possibility of a staff retreat in the fall. I hope we're able to set up some organized activities, like a retreat, to bridge the widening gap in the near future. I also think we need to mix things up at our next meeting using assigned groups and name tags. I know that there will be groans from some folks, but if we don't orchestrate it, people will just sit with their same old group.

After the baby shower festivities my principal introduced a discussion about the "tone of decency" or type of atmosphere we want to maintain at our school at all times. First we discussed it in general and then we talked about it in terms of gender and sexual identity. We had never reviewed this policy as a whole staff before. As an initial discussion, it went very well. People were actively involved in the sharing of resources and the voicing of concerns.

We are going to set up some assemblies that can help our students break down the misconceptions and fears many have about homosexuality and AIDS. We are also going to get films to use in our guidance classes. Perhaps most importantly, my principal is advocating class meetings run by students in our advisories. She is going to get the materials needed to train advisors to facilitate the leadership development of students in their homerooms.

Our new principal has a middle school background and vision, and we are already reaping the benefits, even though she's only been at our school for a few months. I feel almost disloyal saying this, because I really respected my previous principal and the changes he made, but he was an elementary school leader at heart. Funny how you come to these realizations ....

Following the discussion about decency and equity we watched a piece of video from my recent Critical Friends Group taping. I edited the tape, so it was a little rough, but folks were very attentive. We showed a 25-minute segment of our CFG using the "Tuning Protocol" to examine a lesson I taught my eighth graders.

The video showed brief sections of my presentation of the material and my question for the group's focus. My question was about whether the use of models was really helping my kids get the concepts I was trying to teach. This was followed by clarifying

questions and then warm and cool feedback on the part of my CFG members. I then responded to what I'd heard. Finally the video included about five minutes of our group's "debrief" of the process.

After viewing the tape, our staff broke into SLC's and one person in each group presented some work and a focusing question. Another person facilitated the "tuning," and we all participated in the steps we'd seen modeled by my CFG.

It was a fabulous exercise! When we reconvened as a whole staff there was an upbeat buzz in the air. People talked about wanting to use protocols in their team meetings, about joining a CFG, and about how great it was to really accomplish something on an inservice day!

I am really excited about the direction we're moving in as a school. More people took ownership of school leadership yesterday than ever before. If we all see ourselves as leaders we're bound to make strides forward in our work with our children.

We ended the day with a written reflection and a statement by our principal about using protocols with parents and students in the future. It was wonderful!

***March 29, 1999***

***A new policy requiring 8th-grade exit projects has Deb wondering about teachers who've never taught thematically.***

As of June 2000, our students will be required to complete exit projects in grades 8 and 12. The projects must be cross curricular, standards driven, and contain some tangible performance or exhibition piece. In 2002, the projects will need a service component as well.

In 2000, our district is also dropping its social promotion policy in favor of standards and performance-based assessments. In other words, students will need to actually pass their course work and system-wide tests before they move on or out of our system.

While teachers as a whole are rejoicing about the end of social promotion, our joy will necessarily be short lived. Underneath the celebration lies a mass of tangled questions and issues. A few of the questions which loom large are: What happens to the kids we know are on a collision course with failure next year? Do we wait until next year and then suddenly require summer school? Can summer school hope to accomplish what 4, 7, or 11 years did not?

Then of course there's the question of where you place those students who are unsuccessful and/or do not attend summer remediation - do they stay behind with younger students? Finally, in these times of shrinking budgets and swelling enrollments, how do we fund all of these programs, and where do we house them? Our

district is offering summer programs in grades 4, 7, 9, and 12, but they're not required yet. It's a start, but I've heard more discussion about funding and eligibility to teach than discussion of curriculum and content. I wonder what these programs will accomplish?

We need multiple answers to all of these questions - creative strategies that meet the needs of all of our students - but, and here's the rub, creativity and classes of 33+ don't mix well. When you have a student load of 165 or 250, it's hard to get faces and names straight. Clearly we need to know more than our students' names to really address their individual needs, but smaller class size is dismissed as too costly. So having turned away from the single intervention which everyone agrees makes a difference - decreased teacher-student ratios - we forge ahead.

I'm pleased that we're ending social promotion, and I'm excited about the possibilities of exit projects, but I'm worried too. What about all those teachers who haven't ever taught thematically? Where will we find the time for the professional development and reflection that is needed to make exit projects worthwhile?

In my Small Learning Community we're going to invent a new position next year in the hopes of answering some of these questions. Instead of teaching seventh and eighth grade science to 165 kids, I'll be offering technology-assisted problem solving (TAPS) to the entire building of approximately 250 students.

I hope my classroom will become a Tech-Ed lab where students can explore and define the focus of their exit projects. By teaching a range of computer skills and applications I plan to open up the possibilities for our kids' exhibitions.

In addition, I'll be presenting a range of technology challenges that require problem-solving and hands-on solutions using recycled

and consumable building materials. I hope to bring in students from local engineering programs to support this work.

During vacation this week I'm going to write a Michael Jordan grant to try and get extra supplies to support the lab I'm envisioning. I'm also going to draft a survey for my colleagues to determine what novels and themes they'll be developing next year.

As much as possible my instruction should be geared toward drawing in the different disciplines and supporting the work of my colleagues. If we can pull this together, we'll all feel less fragmented. I want the exit projects to be a celebration of what our kids know and not a dead end that hangs over everyone's head.

Having said all of that, I must also confess that I'm scared of teaching so many kids. I remember when I was worried when I started teaching two, then three, and then five sections. Now we're talking ten sections!

I've started telling the kids about the change, and they seem interested. I'm presenting it as a lab we're going to design together to support their projects in other classes. So far, the eighth graders have complained because they won't be here, and the seventh graders have seemed curious. Of course, it might have been the promise of k'nex and computers that really got their attention.

I guess I'd better develop a student survey too, so that my words about joint ownership aren't just empty phrases. Old habits die hard. Despite my three years of CFG work and my lofty democratic ideals, asking the kids is still an afterthought...grrrr.

I'm glad I have a week off to dig into these ideas, and I'm happy I'm being given this opportunity to grow as a teacher. Making it worthwhile for the kids is going to be the test.

***April 12, 1999***

***A gathering of 600 educators is stumped by the question: "What are my students learning, and how do I know?"***

The Annenberg Institute held its "Making Teaching Public" Colloquium in Philadelphia this past week. Over 600 educators and advocates came together to share student work, hold text-based discussions, hear visiting authors, and renew our commitment to our students and their achievement.

On Thursday we began in full session with a videotape of a lesson. We watched as high school students worked in cooperative teams to graph equations and present their work. We observed the teacher acting as a coach as she facilitated the students' efforts to find patterns and rules, make tables, draw graphs, and correctly use graphing calculators.

The math anxiety in the audience hung like a thick cloud over the proceedings. Educational leaders repeatedly prefaced their public remarks with comments like, "I'm not a math person, but...", while sidebar conversations were peppered with questions like, "Why do kids need to know about square roots and variables anyway?" and "I never use this stuff, do you?"

When we moved into smaller groups we were able to discuss all of the positive interactions we witnessed in the video. There was a high level of cooperation and student engagement and many quality graphs were developed, but the question we were trying to

answer was, "What are my students learning, and how do I know?"

We were stumped by that question. It was very hard to say what students really learned. While it was clear that the kids could graph equations, I wasn't sure they could apply the skill to the real world. In fact, most of us had a hard time remembering why this skill was important or useful.

I know that math was a stumbling block for me in high school, and it wasn't until college that I found a teacher who made it real. When my teacher told me to imagine that I was working for GM in production planning and had to decide how many two-door, four-door, or hatchback models to produce, the variables fell into place. X, Y, and Z suddenly had meaning, and I could successfully solve and graph linear equations.

I don't think making higher level math authentic should be seen as an accommodation for slow learners or "special" groups. I think all kids would benefit from an approach that was authentic.

I no longer see myself as math phobic or deficient and I wouldn't label myself as a non-math person, but too many adults still do. And far too many students are failing for us to ignore the need for a fundamental shift in mathematics instruction. I know I'm not alone or the first to have this idea, but I'm concerned that the old, abstract way of teaching math is still the rule rather than the exception.

We broke for lunch after our small group discussions and reconvened in strand sessions in the afternoon. My principal and I attended "A New Vision for the Urban Learner" which was presented by Belinda Williams.

Ms. Williams presented material from the "Urban Learner Framework" and showed a video called *Status Treatment for the*

*Classroom.* My principal is ordering the video for our school. The film showed quite dramatically that some students are ignored or devalued by their classroom peers, but more importantly it showed concrete ways that teachers can affect changes in student status.

In addition to ordering the film, I am sending for Ms. Williams' book, *Closing the Achievement Gap* from ASCD. I'm also going to check out the study group/inquiry kits which Ms. Williams mentioned, which are also available through ASCD.

On Friday we spent the early morning in a text-based discussion about Gloria Ladson-Billings' book, *Dreamkeepers, Successful Teachers of African American Children.* Our discussion was centered on Ms. Billings' definition of culturally relevant teaching and its implications for all our students and classrooms.

After our discussions, we returned to a full session to hear Ms. Billings speak about the research and development which led to the book's premise that we must in fact acknowledge our students' cultures in order to value and effectively teach them.

Ms. Billings' speech and her book acted as a wake-up call for all of us. I don't think any of us left the session without some question or idea about the need to restructure our lessons to make them more respectful of the students' abilities to connect with and enrich their/our learning.

On Saturday, I presented a videotape of one of my 8th grade sections exploring the convection of warm and cool air masses. We spent a three-hour block of time watching the tape and discussing the lesson and students' grasp of the materials as seen through their lab sketches and test answers.

After the group watched the film they shared their observations of my teaching goals and the mutually respectful tone of my

classroom. As I listened to their feedback, I was pleased by their recognition of many of the strengths of the lesson, **but** I was bothered by the nagging question, "If everything's so wonderful, why aren't the kids learning more?"

When we got into the tuning protocol and really started peeling away the layers of the work I was left with the notion that good teaching has to lead to student understanding or else it's an illusory performance. I have visited this issue before, and I expect I'll continue to revisit it; but this time it's from a slightly different angle.

After all of the presentations and discussions of the last three days, I am looking at my curriculum and realizing that it is just that, my curriculum. It is mine, and it is a teacher's predetermined attempt to present what I see as a reasonable amount of information for a school year. It is not an attempt to facilitate student understanding first and curriculum coverage last. It is just the opposite.

We ended the colloquium with an activity in which we made an individual commitment about our teaching. We wrote the commitment down and shared it with another participant. I wrote, with a little help from Simon and Garfunkel, "Slow down, you move too fast. You've got to make the 'learning' last."

To be continued... ✍

***April 19, 1999***

***"If you're working so hard," Deb asks her students, "why aren't you all getting A's?" "At first they just looked at me, but then they began to talk."***

When I returned to school after attending the Annenberg Colloquium, I thought I should share some of my experiences with my students. In particular, I was anxious to talk with the class whose work had been discussed on Saturday.

I described to the kids how folks from all over the country had watched the videotape of their lesson. I shared all of the wonderful feedback I'd heard about their positive cooperation and engagement in the lesson. I also told them about my nagging doubts throughout the process.

I asked my students the question that had been bothering me, "If you're working so hard and I'm using all these cool teaching tools, why aren't you all getting A's?" At first they just looked at me, but then they began to talk.

They talked about basic things like their comfort level in my stuffy, crowded room (the windows are sealed). They complained that they have too many different projects going on in separate subjects to focus on them all. They asked for review sessions or practice tests before assessments.

A boy questioned my practice of calling on boys and girls equally, when girls don't want to answer. He said he knew I was

trying to be fair, but said he gets tired of waiting. A girl responded that she often answers correctly in her head, but is afraid of making mistakes and being embarrassed. Another girl said that she often didn't understand what I was talking about, but was embarrassed to ask. And finally, students complained that after a 100 minutes of language arts, they needed a break before moving into another 100-minute block like science lab.

My students' feedback was very provocative. I spoke informally to my vice-principal about the need for a testing and assignment schedule so kids don't feel so backed up and overwhelmed. We also talked briefly about rostering options to address the students' feeling about longer blocks.

I raised the idea of thematic teaching with my students, so their/our work is not so fragmented, but this needs more discussion. The bell rang, and only two kids had had a chance to respond. (Unfortunately, we gave our standardized tests this week so we haven't returned to the topic yet.)

I need more information about my students' desire for added explanation of my directions and lessons. I'm not sure if Jennifer meant that I need to break up my instructions and direct lessons into smaller chunks or if she meant my language wasn't accessible.

I'll need help with this from my kids and a peer coach. From my perspective I don't think I give a lot of direct instruction, but I'm not sure if the students see it that way. A peer mentor could actually observe and record the number and length of times I speak.

I do know that when I observed the video of my teaching, I felt I talked more often than I thought I did. Some of the talking is repeating students' questions for the whole group and lots of it is questions, but it still adds up to a great deal of teacher talk in comparison to student voice.

In fact, during last Saturday's "tuning" of my work, my focusing question was: "Are students truly constructing meaning when all conversation is channeled through the teacher?" During my tuning session, most teachers were very comfortable with my talking a lot. One said I needed to talk because I was giving new information, but another said that teachers are always giving new information and asked how that related to inquiry and constructivist learning.

When I responded, I thanked folks for their feedback but admitted that I felt a much-needed push by the colleague who posed the teacher talk vs. student inquiry and constructivism question.

This dilemma leads me back to the need to achieve the optimum balance between a student-centered vs. teacher-directed classroom and curriculum. Now, I'm really on a roll. In fact, my thoughts are racing and I can't settle on one question before 10 more pop up! Questions like, "How can you establish a balanced, student-centered classroom when your district is calling for standards-based lessons that follow a standardized curricular framework?" or "Should student curiosity be the driving force of our classrooms?" or "Can we expect students to become lifelong, independent learners if we constantly dictate their educational experience?"

In an effort to escape from all my questions, I turned on my E-mail and what did I see? A message on the coaches' listserv from Susan Gold, a CFG coach in San Francisco, listing still more questions about student voice and democracy! It seems a group of teachers were discussing this at the Colloquium during the breaks.

Someone responded to Susan with a suggestion that anyone interested in student voice should check out the Sudbury Valley

schools on the web. I followed this piece of advice and spent this morning reading about the schools in Framingham, MA.

As I began reading, I was reminded of my attraction to the Montessori Method and its reliance on teacher as coach, student as worker; but Sudbury goes a great deal further. It represents a totally student-directed model, with classes organized solely on the basis of student demand.

The most informative piece I found about Sudbury was a January '94 article by David Ruenzel, "Classless Society," in *Teacher Magazine*. The article has pushed my thinking about my own views of teaching and learning. Do I agree with Montessori that children are naturally curious, or do I agree with Aristotle and countless others that these kids today are lazy and incorrigible?

I agree with the first characterization almost all of the time, and so I need to rethink my classroom approach and ask a CFG colleague to come in and observe. I've also written my principal to ask if I can organize my classroom next year on the basis of monthly skills' profiles which students will then adapt for their own purposes and projects.

I'm comfortable, or at least I think I am, with Montessori. I'm not so sure about Sudbury and the views of its chief spokesperson, Daniel Greenberg. I think there's something valuable to be found in the space between a totally student-directed model and a "rigid, prison-like" teacher-directed one.

I think I'll just continue to plug away, trying to find the balance between exposure, direction, and joint participation on this journey of teaching and learning. I'm glad I'm travelling with my kids and my CFG colleagues. I'd really get lost and overwhelmed without them.

***April 26, 1999***

***The Columbine High tragedy prompts some honest conversation about hate, cliques, and students' need to be heard.***

As the week began I was still wondering how I might reorganize my classroom so that students - their interests and their voice - become the keystone of our lessons and activities. I planned to visit Montessori sites on the web to study this method and its place in the middle school. I also planned to start roughing out a grant application to get supplies for my tech-ed program next fall.

Then I came home and turned on the news of Columbine High and my plans stalled as I tried to make some sense of what I was watching, hearing, and feeling. I turned to friends and family on-line and on the phone for reassurance, for support, for some sense of how we as teachers, as people, should respond.

While I hate the media circus that surrounds any tragedy, I found myself glued to the set, anxious for some key piece of information that would help me understand this senseless horror. I learned nothing from the coverage that would help me the next morning. I went to school feeling confused and rather unsure of what my students' reactions might be.

I decided to ask my kids what they'd heard and whether they wanted to watch "Good Morning America." We watched it for awhile and basically tried to get our facts straight. We shared our

mutual confusion and got back to work on our standardized tests and our Earth Day preparations.

Yesterday, we got word that our TV's would come on for the President's live meeting at a high school in Virginia. After a few technical problems, we all settled in to watch the conversation. About three-fourths of my students watched attentively, while the last quarter either dozed or chatted and laughed nervously.

I've never been good at handling inappropriate laughter, and I scolded the students who were offending me. I assumed that they weren't taking the situation seriously, and my assumption offended one of them. She stated clearly that I couldn't say how she felt because I didn't know. I was bothered by her assertion all evening and came to the conclusion that she was right on the mark.

It was presumptuous of me, a white teacher, to assume that I could understand how she, an African American, felt or processed the news that two young, white men had gone gunning for jocks and minorities in particular. In addition, I think it was shortsighted to expect middle school students to feel comfortable in such a large group setting without more of a focus for their anxieties and attention.

Both of these realizations shaped my approach this morning. I developed a sheet for students to fill out about the Colorado tragedy and their ideas and feelings about our school. I also apologized to Kia and the class about my assumption about her feelings.

I asked students what the situation in Colorado had to do with us here in Philadelphia, and I asked if they felt safe and connected at our school. I also asked if they were interested in peer mediation and if they thought it could work at Central East.

I gave my kids the right to sign their papers or remain anonymous. I stressed that I wanted to know how they really felt and not just what they thought I'd like to hear.

They wrote for about twenty minutes and then passed in their papers. I started a discussion about groups or cliques. I quoted the Columbine student who'd told a reporter that "Everybody hates somebody here. It's normal isn't it?" I asked what they thought about that statement and whether it was true at our school.

We had a substantial discussion about what hate means and settled on the fact that it meant wishing someone was dead. We agreed that we didn't like everyone all of the time, but that hate was too strong a term for our dislikes. We also talked about groups and whether their membership had to be exclusive and based on a pecking order of who was cool and who was not.

Students identified all the different ways that people separate themselves - by "gear," by whether you had a boyfriend/girlfriend, where you lived, how you talked, walked, etc. They really opened up about their feelings. I didn't need to say much at all.

In another class, one student blasted those forces who are calling for metal detectors and armed guards in every school. He said we shouldn't make our schools into prisons. Another student talked about the "home away from home" feeling in our annex because everybody knows you. The kids contrasted this feeling to the way they feel when they visit our main building a half block away. (Our building houses about 300 kids and the main building has about 800.) I told the kids that lots of teachers on our Annenberg listserv were pointing out the anonymity inherent in large factory model schools as a big source of the problem our kids face.

The subject of uniforms came up repeatedly, with students coming down on both sides of the issue. Most students admitted that they thought wearing uniforms would cut down on snobbery based on name brands vs. generic clothing, but many felt this was only a surface issue. They said they thought kids would just look for other ways to divide and judge each other.

On the appeal of violence, I did ask the kids why they all rushed over to the scene of any real or imagined student fight. They said it was just like people watching boxing matches, that it was entertaining. I said that I hated boxing and football but admitted that I did like my fair share of *Lethal Weapon*-type movies. I tried to make a distinction between real and make-believe violence, but it sounded hollow to all of us. It's obvious that I need to think this one through some more.

Whenever the discussion really got going, the bell would ring and it was on to the next class. Even so, I felt much better about our connection today. I promised to read all of their responses over the weekend, and I'll probably write up a summary to distribute on Monday. We're not finished talking, but we have clearly made a start.

There seems to be a recurrent theme these last couple of months. I get concerned or confused; I break down and ask the kids what they think; they tell me, and I feel much more focused. Maybe we can start skipping the concerned, confused stage if I just start listening to them on a regular basis!

Perhaps we all had better start listening and taking our young people more seriously. As the news continues to pour out of Colorado, it seems that there were plenty of explicit warnings given, so why do we keep refusing to listen?

***May 3, 1999***

***When adults fail to respond to students' repeated complaints, Deb reflects, "we show them their lack of power."***

**"Locally, Schools Crack Down"** announced the front page of the *Philadelphia Inquirer.* The article which followed told of 200 bomb threats or threats of violence in area schools since the April 20th killings at Columbine High. I'm happy to say that none of these incidents occurred at Central East Middle School.

As I read through the list of "threats" which the article highlighted, I was appalled to read the following, "...14 year old student took part in a discussion of Littleton that was initiated by the teacher. The girl said she understood how someone who is teased incessantly could snap; her comment led to her being brought to the principal's office, searched, and suspended for two weeks."

The hysteria surrounding the whole issue of school safety is beginning to scare me more than the real or imagined threats of violence at our schools. The blame game is in full swing. When I hear about decisive action or crack downs, I fear for my/our constitutional rights. It's a good thing I don't work at the school that the suspended girl attends or I might be on suspension too.

Empowering ourselves and our kids shouldn't mean setting up a police state or witch hunt. Restrictions are no substitute for

ongoing reflection and conversation among educators, students, and family members.

It's much easier to take a hard line than a hard look at how we handle the kids who are different. What do we say or do when we see the signs of teasing and exclusion? What do we model as adults? Are we engaged in active, "hard" listening? What positive direction have we offered in the last ten days to channel or redirect the fears and anxieties of ourselves and our kids?

Ouch! Having just reread my words of righteous indignation, I've come to the realization that indignation is an easy out too. Last week when I read my students' reflections I was especially struck by one student's feelings of unimportance. Joe had written that he felt we didn't really care what he thought, that we didn't seem to understand his opinions. I decided to have lunch with Joe, ostensibly to find out more about his feelings. In retrospect, I think it was partly to prove that I did care, that I was one of the "good guys."

At our get-together I asked Joe to be more specific about his feelings and he started talking about our horrible lunches in the Annex. ( We don't have a cooking kitchen like the one in the main building, so the kids get stuff which is heated in cellophane - affectionately called a "space lunch.")

As I listened to Joe's complaints, my first reaction was one of relief. I thought to myself, "oh, that's all it is." I sat back and let Joe go on about how the kids suspect they 're being served leftover food at times too. He spoke about pizza served on Friday and then again on Mondays.

We had a nice lunch together, and I later learned from my principal that the lunch program is being totally revamped for next year. Lunches will be prepared in the main kitchen and transported back to our building on a daily basis.

I wish I could say that this change was being made because the teachers had taken the kids' complaints seriously, but Joe was right, I/we had not. We assumed the changes were too costly and that it wasn't really important. It wasn't until the parents went to our new principal that a change was planned.

Our passive listening to the kids' complaints had taught them well. Our inaction in the face of their repeated complaints said to them, "If we think your issue is unimportant there's no use complaining." We showed them their lack of power while continuing to tell them to get involved, to buy-in, to own their educational experience. Adding insult to injury, we then criticized their apathy when they didn't leap at the chance to embrace our agenda for their needs.

Writing this diary is a humbling learning experience. I hadn't thought further about the implications of my response to Joe's feelings until I drafted this piece. I enjoyed our lunch, even felt like I'd made a connection with Joe. Now I'm having one of those *aha!* moments, and I'm feeling like I've become one of those adults who "know what's best for you." YUCK!

Guess I'll be having a talk with Joe's whole class on Monday. It will be interesting to see how they respond to my admission, since they already know they weren't being heard.

Joe's class is my most difficult eighth grade. For the most part, they are underachievers. I'm wondering how this factors into our dismissal of their concerns. It's easy to listen to the honor roll kids and it's easier to get them to comply, too.

I wonder if the kids will be willing to look at how their behaviors contribute to their not being taken seriously. I think it will be an important conversation.

In addition to having lunch with Joe, I summarized my students' reflections for our community's monthly meeting. I suggested that our students write and sign a pledge which we can then forward to President Clinton and the Columbine community. I'll have to post a sign-in to see if people want to follow through on this idea. I was last on the agenda and the bell rang as I was presenting the idea.

In addition, a subcommittee at our school is reviewing various peer mediation models so we can launch a program school-wide in the fall. The need for a program was identified in our school council when we discussed the tone of decency some months ago, but there's a heightened sense of urgency now.

I'm also wondering what kinds of supports need to be mobilized for parents and guardians. It is extremely difficult for families to admit that their children are troubled or beyond reach. It's like admitting that you're not totally in charge or worse, that you're not a good parent.

I remember the teenage years in our household. Having other parents to talk to - parents who were having similar difficulties - was critical for me. I'm just trying to imagine the sense of fear and isolation that many of our working and non-English speaking parents must feel.

I'm sure there must be parental support networks in some other schools or districts. I'm going to post a question about this type of work on Middle-L and the Annenberg listservs.

While I'm at it, I'm going to see if I can get a group of teachers to write our union with me. I know it's the union's job to call for protections for us, but I'd really like to see it lend its considerable weight to a proactive campaign around the tone of decency and

support for students, their families, and their teachers. More on this later....

Back in my classroom, I videotaped my kids as they sang and danced to environmental songs of their choice for an Earth Day assignment. Watching my kids sing my "corny" science songs as they grinned from ear to ear was a refreshing break from the fear and doom being broadcast on every TV channel.

Our silkworms hatched last week and I love experiencing the wonder year after year with my students as we watch them grow from little black squiggles, to tiny worms, to fully grown caterpillars, cocoons, and moths. The kids crowd around the box each day as they enter and beg to hold them or take them home.

Finally, we held our annual SHERO celebration Thursday afternoon. We've been planning and rescheduling since March, but it finally happened yesterday. The girls made food and brought in supplies. It was their event. I don't think I've ever served bologna sandwiches at a party before. They invited women who were important supports and role models for them. They celebrated their guests, their SHEROES, with certificates and short speeches and their wasn't a dry eye in the house!

I'm glad I get to see my kids as kids on a regular basis. I'll be working on my listening skills in this next period, trying to make sure that I listen hard and equally to all my kids' concerns.

***May 10, 1999***

***As schools "crack down" in the wake of the Columbine killings, Deb weighs what is lost when the forces of fear take control of schooling.***

Our school continues to move forward relatively untouched by explicit bomb threats or incidents that may be linked to Columbine. However, this week a group of high school students, one of whom was a sibling of a CEM student, staged a fight outside our school at dismissal.

We were caught unaware, and the police were slow to respond to calls for assistance. Consequently, at least one teacher's car was damaged from kids standing or jumping on the roof and a teacher was bitten as she became caught in the middle of this rather large disturbance.

We have never experienced anything like this fight before; and, as I said, the students were not even our present or former kids. Teachers who witnessed the scene were badly shaken, and rumors of a repeat set the tone for yesterday's dismissal. Police and school officials were out in force yesterday, and the front of our main building was cleared quickly and quietly.

On another note, a teacher wrote to Middle-L asking the rest of us if we'd heard the rumored national call to violence for Monday, May 10th. The teacher went on to say that in Maryland the state testing schedule had been changed in recognition of potentially

high absenteeism due to parents' fearful response to this widespread rumor.

My first response was to assume that the rumor was a hoax. I asked the author of the message to verify the source of the information about Maryland. Unfortunately, the teacher/parent who sent the message was both willing and able to document her information.

Now, teachers are looking for the potential significance of the May 10th date, and schools are vacillating between a hard line on absenteeism and notification of parents about rumored problems.

I'm trying to process all of this as a teacher, as a parent and as a citizen. Perhaps more importantly, I'm trying to wear those three hats at the same time. The teacher and citizen says, "schools need to stay open and the business of education must go on as normal." The parent, the one getting ready to leave for a college graduation this afternoon, feels pangs of doubt and fear.

I will work past the somewhat hollow feeling in my stomach as the day wears on, but I can't help but feel relieved that my kids are grown. It's the parent hat which keeps getting in the way of my rational vision. I will urge others to respond to rumors with a show of strength. I'll continue to work in a school that moves forward proactively as opposed to one that reacts in fear of potential violence, **but** I must confess to nagging doubts of "what if" as I think about having the responsibility to protect the children of others who have been entrusted to my/our care.

As I write this I can feel my fear turning to anger. I resent having to worry about senseless violence. There's no more room on the plate of things to consider as we try to educate our students. Last week our police commissioner spoke of the need to keep schools

safe without turning them into prison-like environments, and I heard my own and my students sentiments echoed in his words.

Commissioner Timoney also quoted Kwame Toure, ne Stokley Carmichael, who said that "violence is as American as apple pie" way back in the 60s, a time many of us had the luxury of seeing as friendlier. Perhaps it's time to take stock of Mr. Toure's insights now. Perhaps it's time to stop dividing up the blame between parents, teachers, the media, or whomever the scapegoat of the moment is, and just work together to solve it.

I have no stomach for a life lived in fear, nor do I care to endanger anyone's children or myself. It's time to rebuild our sense of community, or maybe it's time to build a new community, one where we're all safe together, one that hasn't existed yet in our country.

***May 17, 1999***

***With only five weeks of school left, Deb is anxious to have closure and "to build a bridge from this year to the next."***

*Anxious* is the word that sums up how I'm feeling this morning. I'm anxious about my long ride to Penn State to see my daughter graduate. I'm anxious because a whole host of assignments and tasks loom large and there are only five weeks of school left, only two until my grades are due!

But mostly, I'm anxious about having some sort of closure to the school year that represents more than a posting of grades and an awareness of all the loose ends that still didn't get pulled together. I feel a need to openly construct a bridge from this year to the next with colleagues, students, and the community.

A few years ago, a colleague of mine raised the importance of beginnings and endings. He had gone to a summer training session related to his church/community involvement and was left with a sense of concern about the way we drift from one thing to the next. I was struck by his comments at the time, but then I guess I got pulled into the whirlpool of daily events and deadlines.

As I try to make sense of this year, as I try to struggle against the tide of student and teacher feeling that we're just winding down, I'm struck anew by the memory of his concerns.

The concept of "less is more" is literally ringing in my ears as I try to make some sense of our science agenda for the next five

weeks, and I haven't even figured in all of the special eighth grade activities.

How can I organize our classroom time so that the kids leave with a sense of accomplishment and lessons learned that will support them as they move ahead into another school or grade? For my own sanity, I need to make a master calendar and work backwards. On Monday I'll share it on chart paper with my classes. I know from student comments that they're feeling anxious too, and having their input will help to focus the work realistically.

But I'm not just talking about getting assignments done. I'm talking about a different kind of reflection and planning. Not the kind that leads directly to getting your records and ordering done for next term, but a new kind which taps into the heart of our learning community, something that cuts through the anxiety about paperwork and responsibilities and asks some deeper questions.

I guess I'm really asking how we can organize our collective time so that the adults also leave with a sense of accomplishment and direction for the year ahead. I don't think anyone's really satisfied with the annual feeling of "next year I'll do it better."

Left to ourselves, some of us read, some of us even talk or plan together with a partner, but we end up in the same place each spring. We wonder where the time went, and despite our frustration, we vow to be better organized next year, and the next, and the next.

I think we need to break this cycle.

Tomorrow my Critical Friends Group meets, and in another week we will have a full staff meeting. I think we need some writing and some conversation about what I'll call "bridging" for lack of another term. I don't think we can just end the year and let "some"

people work and think over the summer about how we should begin as a whole school in the fall. I know that's the standard approach, and many teachers will balk at the idea of reading or writing over the summer; but the standard approach leads to the same old result, this heavy feeling of defeat, of opportunities missed.

I'm trying to sift through all of the reasons we cite when we look for the cause(s) of our failure to accomplish as much as we had planned or hoped for, and discipline seems to be a central thread. We can all readily agree that behavior problems are a major distraction, but I don't think we have much unity on the possible sources of those problems. In fact I can't remember ever having a general discussion from that vantage point.

Last year, our leadership team worked long and hard over the summer. They assembled a discipline code with a uniform set of rules and consequences. It was very good work, but there's a sense now that many people have gone back to their own interpretation of how to do things. Why?

Now, after Columbine, there's a growing sense of a need for a response which is preventive rather than punitive, but again these requests are expressed without a recognition that reflection and consensus are needed before any effective plan can be adopted.

I know my principal is planning on putting a conflict resolution class into our students' rosters next year, and I'm glad she's taking such a decisive step. However, I'm worried that it could become just another class, divorced from the rest, if we don't develop a school-wide focus on the underlying issue of mutual respect or the lack of it.

I'm thinking that we need to ask an essential question, possibly one about a tone of decency and how we can build it

throughout our school. I know we can't assign reading over the summer, but perhaps we can "strongly suggest" that folks read a particular book or an article or two over the break.

I just purchased *Waging Peace in Our Classrooms* by Linda Lantieri and Janet Patti and it looks like it might help set the stage for a substantive discussion. Maybe a significant core of our staff would be willing to read and possibly reflect about this book and the issues it raises in writing.

I'll share these ideas with my CFG and see if we can't act as a catalyst for these discussions. As I read over this entry, I'm aware that I'm talking about changing the culture of schooling. The notion that we should study and plan over the summer is a threat to the sacrosanct but self-defeating notion of total summer freedom which we've been led to believe is our much-earned reward. I think all teachers, especially good teachers, do think and plan over the summer, but there's something about being accountable for it which may rub some folks the wrong way. Time will tell.

We're also having our school council wrap up next week. Perhaps asking parents if they'd like to join us in some reading or discussion before school begins would be a good way to up the ante on that body as well. Working together, we could make a truly fresh start.

If a core group is willing to take this, or similar steps to broaden the circle of planning responsibility for our school, I think we'll reap tremendous results in the fall and beyond. I'm tired of fresh starts that lead us to the same destination every spring - and I don't think I'm alone.

*May 24, 1999*

***Giving "Ask the Girls" club members an opportunity to work with real tools in an all-female context proves to be an eye-opener.***

Over the next few weeks I'm going to try and take stock of the major projects I've been involved in this year. I'm going to start with "Ask the Girls" because we had a great session Friday afternoon.

We spent a good deal of time laughing as we planned our end-of-the-year slumber party and the video we are making to document the club's time together. It was energizing to listen as the girls talked about everything they want to share on the video.

They decided to talk first about the club, the conversation, and why they like it. They want to show off their model cars and the tools they used to build them too.

Building the cars was the single most powerful recruitment activity this year. Giving girls the opportunity to work with real tools in an all-female context was an eye opener. Not only did girls build their own cars, they helped each other at every turn.

The atmosphere was very low-key; trial and error was the rule, not the exception. Since I'm no expert at building things, we all learned together. No one put down anyone else's effort and our only casualty was one of my tables...one of the girls was drilling without a mat and made a hole in it.

Building the cars also gave me an opportunity to learn first-hand about the positive power of inclusion. Jen is a special ed student. I taught her class science enrichment a couple of years ago, and she was a handful.

When she signed up for "Ask the Girls" I have to admit I wasn't exactly thrilled. I always try and start fresh with students, so I tried to suspend judgment, and boy am I glad I did! From the start, Jen was very vocal in our conversations, but never unruly or negative. As we began the car project, she stood out as a leader. She completed her car first and was a great help to everyone else.

During the planning for our annual SHERO celebration she made suggestions, fixed food, and made a speech to honor her mother, even though her mom could not attend.

Jen's honesty and hard work have made her a full member of our club. I think the other girls know she's in special ed because she explained that she wasn't graduating because her mom wants her to spend another year at our school. It hasn't made any difference in the group. She's been accepted; she's blossomed.

Writing about this has gotten me thinking about whether or not holding Jen back is the best move for her. I understand her mom's fears about our area high school, but I'll have to explore this further with our counselor on Monday. There's a small high school in our cluster where I have a friend who teaches special ed. I think I'll call Sharon and see what ideas she has to offer about both inclusion and special programs from which Jen might benefit.

Back to the club and our planned video, the girls also decided to talk on tape about a film we watched together. "Girls Like Us" was featured on PBS as part of the Point of View series a couple of years

ago. The film follows five girls from South Philadelphia throughout their high school years.

The multicultural group of girls represents a real slice of life for girls in Philadelphia and beyond. They go to different schools, public and parochial, and come from both single parent and nuclear family households.

We watched the film over a three-week period. It's a troubling story to watch as the girls express their attitudes about love, double standards, commitment, sex, pregnancy, and their futures.

It's particularly painful to watch two of the young women. The first moves from one intimate relationship to the next, having two children along the way, and is unfocused from the start. She never seems to take the time to be young, to first be herself, to learn anything except how to be a mom and part of a couple. At the end of the film, she's 19 and marrying a guy with two more kids!

The second, a young African American woman is really strong at the film's start, but sadly lets her grades slip and becomes pregnant after a close relative is killed as a result of random violence. Her child then becomes her whole world with the hope that someday, maybe he will fulfill her dreams of a musical career.

Without describing the entire film, I just have to say that each time I watch it, I'm filled with a sense of loss because the girls are so much like my students. It's not a film about someone else, but rather as the title says, it's about "Girls Like Us."

On the other hand, watching it brings the issues right into focus and always leads to good conversations. I am continually left wondering though, will these conversations and activities help make "the" difference?

Some of my girls stay in touch after they graduate. Some have even asked for a similar club in their high schools. One of last year's alums ran for office in her high school this year and was undaunted when she lost, vowing to try again next year!

I know the club's important, but it's just not enough. We - my partner at the district and I - started out this year with a plan to replicate our efforts in the two other middle schools in our cluster. Bureaucracy got in the way. Setting up meetings with all three administrators took a long time, and only one of the schools got involved.

Communication between our two clubs is basically nonexistent. We're pretty much back at square one. I'm not giving up though. We are making the video and hope it will be useful as a tool with other students, parents, and my colleagues.

I'm still met with comments about how our girls "don't know how to act" or how "it's our boys who really need extra help." I know I sound like a broken record as I reply that we're not asking for "less for boys, but more for girls." It's my hope that when they watch and listen to our girls on the video, the experience will have a strong impact.

I also think our new vice-principal would be willing to sponsor a similar group for boys in the fall. I'll ask him Monday. I do agree that our boys need more support. I just don't think I'm the person for that job.

On another note, my Critical Friends Group has decided to read *Waging Peace in Our Classrooms* over the summer break. On Tuesday, I'll share it with our school council as an option. Who knows, maybe we can start the year in September with a discussion of the book and its lessons for Central East. I hope so.

*May 31, 1999*

***Central East's Invention Convention acts "as a real window into the minds and abilities" of students who usually opt out.***

The "Relaxa-Pillow," the "Collapsible Trash Can," and the "Gel-Brush" were featured at our 2nd Annual Invention Convention, along with hundreds of boats and a handful of catapults. Our convention was held outdoors yesterday. It was a big success.

Last year, I attended a Saturday workshop about the "IDEPPEI" Problem-Solving Method with two colleagues and nine students. We spent the day at the University of the Arts where we met inventors, watched an animated short about IDEPPEI, and worked in teams to design boats that would travel down a 4-meter long channel.

It was an exciting day and the teachers involved were pleased that we'd found a way to tap into our students' creative problem solving abilities. We had been discussing gaps in our science curriculum, and we all agreed that our kids rarely got to design models in the course of our daily instruction.

We returned to school armed with a copy of the IDEPPEI animated tape and lots of enthusiasm. We formed a subcommittee of teachers and students and organized our first invention convention.

We gave students the option of building boats or designing inventions of their own choice. Since we had never asked our kids to invent something before, we were concerned about striking the right balance between too much and too little support or direction.

We posted student-made signs all over both of our buildings to build interest in the event. Some of us shared books with our classes about inventors and inventions, books like *Mistakes That Worked* which tended to de-mystify the whole notion of who invents and how you go about it.

Individual teachers decided whether participation was optional or required and whether students worked as individuals or in groups. My husband built a channel for the boats by capping a rain gutter, and we were all set to go.

When the big day arrived last year, it was pouring outside, and the event was moved indoors to my classroom. Since it was our first time planning such an event, we overlooked small details like the weather.

This year we had a rain date, but we didn't need it. In fact, I have a fairly painful sunburn this morning, but other than that, the day was great!

Most of my students really got into the spirit of inventing. I told them to think about real problems they've either had or observed and then brainstorm ways to solve them. They were required to submit a form which explained the purpose and process of their work. I also asked them to sketch their models as they developed them. I stressed that their grade would be based primarily on their documented thinking and working processes and not on whether their inventions actually worked as planned.

On Thursday, we spent the day presenting work in class. Next year I hope to expand this aspect so that my students can develop and use a rubric to evaluate their work and the work of their peers.

Some of the highlights of my students' hard work were:

- John, who thought about being too tired to get up and turn his music on and off when he was going to sleep. He invented the "Relaxa-Pillow." He connected his Walkman and headphones to his pillow; he's still working on the issue of wasting batteries if it stays on all night.
- Marc, who noticed that his brother had trouble carrying trash cans around or holding bags open while he did construction work. His observation led him to create a collapsible trash can frame, and he had a great time demonstrating it all day yesterday!
- And Jen and Mandy, who created the "Napkin Picker Upper," a device which separates napkins so that you only get one at a time, instead of a whole pile. The other students were unimpressed with their effort until I talked about my many years as a waitress and the number of napkins that are wasted in restaurants.

If they can come up with a way to refine their idea, it could be a winner. Restaurants could save a good deal of money with a device like theirs.

This year, in addition to the boat option, we offered kids the possibility of building catapults. I got the idea from a *Science Scope* article, and the other science teachers liked it, so we added it to our list of potential challenges.

A whole group of my girls and a few boys made catapults. We had contests measuring which ones could launch balls of clay the farthest against the school wall. Next year, I think more kids will try this device. They really liked the contests and the different models my kids had made.

Finally, one of the funniest sagas of youthful invention was the "Gel-Brush" and its inception. The other day, one of my girls came to school with a huge container of hair gel in her bookbag. The container came open and gel went everywhere! I was none too pleased when she wasted half my class and my paper towels cleaning up the mess.

Another girl just observed the problem and went home to design a little container which she attached to the end of a hairbrush. The container resembled a contact lens case. She explained in her presentation that you could carry just enough gel for touch ups with her invention and avoid accidents like the one we'd had recently in class.

The inventions and presentations acted as a real window into the minds and abilities of a great number of our students. Kids who usually opt out decided to buy in and participate. Despite a limited time frame and little classroom support, almost everyone got involved.

This activity works really well, although we don't offer prizes or external rewards. It makes me think about questions I've been raising over and over again this year. Questions about student motivation and authentic learning vs. teaching more and more content which is prescribed from on high and not well received by our kids.

I'm anxious to tease out the lessons from this experience next week with my kids and colleagues. I hope to incorporate a great deal of tech design into my new class next year. If we can tap even a little of the enthusiasm that I witnessed yesterday, it will be an exciting year.

On another note, our school council elections were held this week. I'm looking forward to co-chairing the body with a parent representative next year.

We never really looked at student work with parents on council this past year. Too much of our time was spent interviewing and selecting a new principal and two vice-principals. Our staff seems set in place now, but in a district with many vacancies, you never can tell.

However, we did begin to have some really substantive discussions toward the end of this year, and I feel confident that we can set a real plan of work in motion next fall. My goal, as co-chair, is to introduce the use of protocols to examine student work. I'll meet with Ann, my parent co-chair, this summer to see if she's interested.

***June 14, 1999***

***June is always bittersweet for 8th-grade teachers, as they wonder if they've made a difference in the lives of kids who are moving on.***

While I try to avoid it, the countdown is unavoidable. End-of-the-term activities are in full flower. Friday before last I traveled to Washington, D.C., on the eighth grade trip. Last Thursday, I attended another awards ceremony for our undefeated girls' softball team — our fifth, consecutive, undefeated season!

This past week exams were being given at the high schools and that means lots of early dismissals for our alums. Successful former students have been popping in regularly. They provide just the right shot of inspiration during these days of records and restlessness.

This morning (Saturday), my rec room is filled with sleeping girls. We had our annual "Ask the Girls" sleepover last night and I'm sleepy but pleased this morning. Maybe it's the fatigue, but I really enjoyed watching them last night as they had pillow fights and did and re-did each other's hair styles. Luckily, my hair is quite short, so I was spared.

June is always bittersweet for me. I guess it is for all teachers. You build toward this "commencement," this moving away from middle school, but you feel a tug as they leave you. I find myself wondering what they'll remember, how they'll fare in high school and in life.

I guess it really comes down to wanting to know if I/we've

made a difference in their lives and in all our futures. When they come back to visit, taller, more confident and accomplished, it's always a little awkward. They always tell you how small the school looks and in my case, they enjoy commenting on how short I look. It's as if you can hear them measuring up both their middle years and you, and thinking about how people and things, which once loomed so large, now seem so much smaller.

I went back to visit an eighth grade teacher once and she acted rather detached. I felt hurt - as though I'd been foolish in thinking she had cared. But now I know she had just moved on and was unsure of herself with the 'new' me. That experience taught me to never pull back. I've decided that if they take the time to come back, they're willing to hear all the standard comments about how big they are, answer all the questions about their experiences and their families - the whole nine yards.

As I reread these paragraphs about students moving on and away, I'm reminded of my grab bag of feelings about all the colleagues that are moving on this year. Our district is faced with a high number of retirements because of a lucrative package being offered this year. Retirements have in turn opened up transfer and promotion opportunities; and once again, our principal is leaving.

My principal came on board in December when my former principal took a suburban position. I was really thrown by that chain of unexpected events and was pleased with the smooth transition we were able to make. My current principal is a colleague and a friend, as was her predecessor. She is truly an instructional leader and has made her mark in the short time she's been at our school.

Yesterday, she announced her promotion at an impromptu

after-school meeting. There were tears and a palpable sense of confusion mixed with hurt filled the room. I guess it's normal to feel a little abandoned. I can only hope that more rational responses will prevail after a period of adjustment.

It's hard to keep reshuffling our school team, but it's the kids who need to be protected from any abandonment of our program or goals. Regardless of the real or imagined chaos that we experience, our students can't afford a teacher response that says, "I'm not getting involved with another administrator so she/he can move on too" or "I'm just closing my door and worrying about my classroom."

Luckily, we have a strong team at our school. I hope after a weekend to digest the news, folks will realize that it's the team which makes the difference. Maybe it's because teachers have forgotten how to see themselves as leaders beyond their individual classrooms, which makes administrative changes so scary.

Building that self-awareness of our leadership is hard work because it comes with a hefty price tag of taking responsibility. It means challenging ourselves and our colleagues. It means challenging the status quo that says we're just so many technicians who need scripts we can follow to make student achievement a reality.

My Critical Friends Group meets this week, and I can see that our agenda will be shifted a bit with this new shift in circumstances. However, I hope we'll be able to see our way clear to proceed with our plans, welcoming our next principal into our process, a process which belongs to all those who rise to the occasion of reforming our schools with our students at the center.

I have been touched and moved by my association with my

principals, just as I am affected by so many of my students. I would not trade my brief experiences with the two of them for twenty years with an administrator who lacked vision. Having said that, I do hope our Vice Principal moves up and that our transition goes smoothly. Time will tell. ✍

## *June 21, 1999 - The Final Word*

***As school ends, Deb measures her goals against her accomplishments and begins revving up for the year to come." I can see already that next big mountain straight ahead."***

Looking back over this school year I am aware of all the projects that I set out to complete. In most cases I made some progress, but none fully realized the goals which I had set. Rather than get demoralized about this reality, I've decided to re-examine my goal setting and my follow-through so I can do better in the future.

First, I'm considering the Coalition of Essential Schools' view that "less is more." On the surface I have maintained agreement with this concept, but far too often I have been guilty of trying to "cover the curriculum."

I'm reminded of the mosaic mural which my students and I designed in the fall. We did a great job - the sea life mural is truly magnificent! However, our plans to set up a mini-museum for primary students was left by the wayside when I judged that time was racing by and we weren't going to get to the rest of our curriculum before June.

Students have continued to ask me when we might begin to invite younger students for lessons, and I've taken to answering them with rather vague comments about next year. While it's true that we would not have covered a lot of other material if we had continued with our planning and implementation of the mini-

museum, I actually believe it would have made for a richer learning experience.

I will be teaching my seventh graders again next year, and I think it's important that we make use of the mural. These students will be required to develop exit projects in order to graduate next June. Perhaps some of them will decide to pursue a topic connected to ocean life. I plan to encourage them to do so.

Another area which was of real importance to me in the fall was gender equity. A colleague and I began the year with a plan to launch an after school girls' network in our cluster's three middle schools. While my own "Ask the Girls" club was successful, it was still separate from any other efforts. My club touched the lives of about 15 to 20 girls, and I'm pleased with their experiences talking, writing, and building cars. However, I was initially determined to reach more students and that didn't happen.

Efforts to establish a network were bogged down very early on in administrative protocols. The difficulty of communication across schools really crippled our efforts. I'm now evaluating the situation with an eye toward expansion at my own school. If I can co-sponsor the club next year with a teacher from another small learning community, our exposure and outreach will be that much broader.

Also, if we can deepen our ties to the local science museum network, they might be able to coordinate more of the cross visitation and facilitate a joint museum trip or event. As a classroom teacher, most of my time is necessarily spent in my classroom and away from the phone, fax, etc. While the goal of developing an inter-school network of girls' clubs was a good one, it was probably unrealistic to think I could pull it off with just one, equally busy partner.

I must confess that I get annoyed when folks keep assuming I should leave the classroom, but I guess they're correct in their recognition that some of my goals don't work with a full teaching load in tow. Since I don't want to leave the kids, I will have to think more creatively about future partnerships and supports.

The results of our science work were also mixed this year. While our department met almost every month, the lack of consistent contact in between meetings often led to uneven training and sharing between new and veteran science teachers. I'm thinking of proposing a "buddy" system of sorts in each small learning community for next year. These relationships evolve naturally, but if our administrator is willing to formalize it and establish regular meeting times, I think our new teachers will feel more supported and our experienced folks will feel less isolated and overwhelmed.

We are definitely going to change our school science fair to more of a culminating activity. Holding our kids and ourselves to December deadlines this past school year really undercut the value of the experience for almost everyone involved.

Thinking about the science work also brings me back to the question of whether we should have specialists or generalists in the middle school organization. While I fully support the idea that we are teaching children and not isolated subjects, I also understand the luxury of being able to devote my attentions to one area of the curriculum.

Teachers who are required to teach two or three areas cannot possibly give all those areas the attention needed. If we are going to move into project-based learning with all the hands-on materials and activities that the approach requires, then teachers need time to plan and execute those plans together.

I guess common planning and reflection is uppermost in my mind as I move into my new teaching assignment. I'll be teaching some sort of tech-ed program - but the new curriculum remains to be designed. Our goal is for me to provide computer instruction and support for the cross-curricular, exit projects our eighth graders are required to present as part of our new graduation requirements. Given the reality that most of our staff are unaccustomed to teaching thematically, it seemed like we needed to build in additional supports for our staff and students, and my new position was born.

On the up side, I'm excited about the possibility of moving thematic teaching forward and giving students a chance to get really involved in a major project. On the down side, I'm worried about my student load; and because my administrator is leaving, I'm kind of in limbo in terms of my planning. Teaching every kid in the building once a week vs. a smaller group (like the eighth graders, three times a week), calls for very different goals and expectations.

As I write this, I'm plagued with questions about my new schedule. How many kids will I see daily, weekly? Will they dash in for 50 minutes and then disappear for two days or a week? Where will I store their work if it's truly hands-on? How can I offer student choice, if I'm teaching 250 kids? Are themes the answer? My head is spinning, but I can't move forward until I know what the take of my new administrator is.

Whatever schedule we agree upon, I'm very concerned that my work not just be an "extra" or a "special" where the kids get computer time. I want to establish standards-based lessons and assignments that support the needs of the students and my fellow teachers.

My work is cut out for me. I'm considering developing a unit plan for September that reviews or introduces basic technology and design tools to all the kids. Beyond September, I'm looking for ways to reach out to other teachers in order to make project support mean something other than web searches and word processing.

But I digress. Instead of looking back, I'm already off and running ahead. The past year and the coming year do seem wedded, though, by the need to team with others and build in reflection time.

Speaking of teaming and reflection, my Critical Friends Group had their last meeting for the term this week and we spent our time developing a plan of work for next year. We built in lots of time for looking at student and teacher work. We also discussed our responsibility as teacher leaders. We talked about becoming more involved in professional development design and delivery at our school and about making the work more public with colleagues and the community.

I read part of last week's diary aloud during our "connections" period at the start of the meeting. Although you don't respond to each other during this activity, there were references made throughout the meeting about our responsibility as teacher-leaders, as we wait to hear who our next principal will be.

On a separate, but related note, one of the other CFG members has decided to keep a diary next year. He said he could tell how important it had become for me and my growth. I'm excited that he's decided to write too. Maybe we can share our entries as part of our peer coaching commitment.

I feel really good about the CFG work. Despite my sense of urgency and tendency to plow ahead, the group has kept me grounded. We have taken the time to build the trust needed to make

our time and work together something we all value. Time, of course, remains our enemy. There's never enough time to teach, to share, to reflect, but we're hanging in, and we're growing.

Last September I/we made a commitment to develop a collaborative inquiry about whether our use of technology was helping our students improve their basic skills and critical thinking abilities. Our action research has been built into next year's CFG plan, but I have lingering doubts about its actualization. Two hours a month just isn't enough time. The real work of the inquiry must be integrated into our daily teaching, or it will remain a hollow, if interesting, question. I plan to turn to the Annenberg coaches for insights into the ways they are integrating their action research.

I've really enjoyed writing this diary. The schedule has forced me to reflect weekly and has led me to ask questions that I might have otherwise overlooked — questions primarily of myself, but also of my students and my peers.

For example, if it weren't for my diary, I don't think I would have felt the need to sum up our science fair with the kids and my peers. I would have been disappointed in the imbalance in the results and would have talked about it in my learning community, but it would have been dropped like yesterday's news. Keeping this diary compelled me to at least try and tie up loose ends, even though there was still a constant push to rush forward to the next deadline or assignment.

Even though some colleagues were reluctant to discuss the science fair results, we did plug ahead, and I circulated the responses I collected when I surveyed my students about their experiences. Consequently, we're not only revising the timetable, we're reviewing the science fair rubric as well. In order to promote an equitable

experience for all of our kids, we're going to check ourselves for consensus before we set our deadlines.

Another example of how writing and publishing a diary has altered my perspective and my work is around the whole area of administrative turnover at my school and in my district.

Despite my initial feelings, which were a bit panicky, writing my thoughts down helped me to regain my perspective. Writing and then sharing what I'd written placed the children back at the center where they belong.

Finally, writing about Columbine and the need for peer mediation moved me to ask my kids to write as well. Reading their words let me understand that neither their silence nor their silliness reflected a lack of concern about issues of violence and or safety.

Writing has slowed me down and built in "wait time," for myself and for others. It has caused me to go beyond my assumptions and pursue the conversations that need to be pursued. I'm looking forward to writing again next year, and now that I'm hooked I may even continue on my own over the break.

I don't really feel like the year is ending. I'm in the midst of my planning for next month's summer enrichment program and, as I said, my mind is already racing toward the fall and the new school year. For me summer is almost like downshifting. I'm not pulling over to rest, and I can see already see that next big mountain straight ahead. But I'm slowing down a bit and enjoying the scenery before the next ascent.

# *Afterword*

In her excellent book *Figuring It Out: Standards-Based Reform in the Middle Grades,* my mentor and colleague Anne C. Lewis writes: "Mention of urban middle schools prompts an instant image of places where most of us would rather not be. Unsettling, weary on the psyche, frustrating, with a scarcity of joy and a surplus of problems, often in bleak surroundings - these are the perceptions of schools full of some of the neediest youngsters in our country."

"We miss so much by thinking this way," Lewis cautions us. So many urban middle schools, she says, "teem with ideas, astonishingly good teachers, and youngsters with hope."

Anne and I have prowled the halls of many urban schools together in our work for the Focused Reporting Project, which not only maintains MiddleWeb but regularly reports on middle grades reform for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's Program for Student Achievement. Regrettably, I have never visited Deborah Bambino's classroom at Central East Middle School in Philadelphia. In fact, should I ever see Deb across a crowded room, I hope she'll be wearing a nametag, because I don't know what she looks like. Our relationship - writer and editor, teacher and learner, professional friends - is entirely a product of the technological age. Thanks to E-mail and the Internet, Deb and I have enjoyed a fruitful partnership over the last 18 months without ever laying eyes on each other.

Yet I have no doubt that Deb Bambino is one of the "astonishingly good teachers" of whom Anne Lewis speaks. Her talent,

commitment, and drive come through in every entry of her middle school diary. Any school in which Deb works is sure to "teem with ideas," and the students privileged to be in her class are surely "youngsters with hope."

What do we learn from reading *A Middle School Diary*? First and foremost, I think, we see the power of daily and weekly written reflection. In the lazy days of summer, it's easy to resolve to faithfully keep a diary, but it's a rare teacher who maintains that resolve once the frantic pace of school begins. By making a public commitment to diary-writing, Deb was able to keep her resolution for the first time, and her readers can have no doubt that the process of reflection deepened her insights and improved her teaching.

Some other "truths" come through as we read these weekly entries. When teachers collaborate and critically assess each other's work, the whole school benefits. When teachers have opportunities to pursue staff development that connects directly to their classroom practice, they grow professionally and hunger for more. When teachers make the significant effort required to convince students that they must "own" their learning, the potential payoff is enormous.

We learn some sad truths, too. Even in schools where educators are sharply focused on improving their craft and helping all children succeed, they are tormented by the demon *Time*. Years of honing and polishing educational practice in a school can be dulled by rapid principal and teacher turnover or a few bad judgment calls. And the saddest truth of all, perhaps - that teachers and schools rarely control their own destinies and the precipitous actions of central offices, school boards, and state legislatures can create an atmosphere of edginess and uncertainty that stifles creativity and impedes progress.



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Deborah Bambino continues to write her MiddleWeb diary. In her new role as a tech prep teacher with 11 sections of students, she is challenged in ways she never imagined. Recently I sent a particularly thoughtful and reflective diary entry about her new work to Dr. Barnett Berry, who spends his days campaigning for teacher professionalism as associate director of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.

Berry wrote back: "Deborah's experiences as an inner-city teacher are not at all uncommon. What is remarkable are her reflections on those experiences. She's asking the right questions and pursuing the right solutions. She gets it. She knows what will make schools work."

"If she and her colleagues are not able to make Central East a great school for kids," Berry concluded, "the blame will fall, not on them, but on a system of education that makes it impossible for even the best teachers to succeed."

To which I would only add: As long as there are Deborah Bambinos determined to challenge the system and beat the odds, there is hope. Hope for kids. Hope for public schools.

In his watershed book *Possible Lives*, researcher Mike Rose writes: "Public education is bountiful, crowded, messy, contradictory, exuberant, tragic, frustrating, and remarkable." Deb Bambino would surely respond: "Amen."

— John Norton

## National Middle School Association

National Middle School Association, established in 1973, is the voice for professionals and others interested in the education and well-being of young adolescents. The association has grown rapidly and enrolls members in all fifty states, the Canadian provinces, and forty-two other nations. In addition, fifty-six state, regional, and provincial middle school associations are official affiliates of NMSA.

NMSA is the only association dedicated exclusively to the education, development, and growth of young adolescents. Membership is open to all. While middle level teachers and administrators make up the bulk of the membership, central office personnel, college and university faculty, state department officials, other professionals, parents, and lay citizens are members and active in supporting our single mission – improving the educational experiences of 10-15 year olds. This open and diverse membership is a particular strength of NMSA.

The association publishes *Middle School Journal*, the movement's premier professional journal; *Research in Middle Level Education*; *Middle Ground, the Magazine of Middle Level Education; Target*, the association's newsletter; *The Family Connection*, a newsletter for families; *Classroom Connections*, a practical quarterly resource; and a series of research summaries and other items available through Fax-on demand.

The association is also a leading publisher of professional books and monographs in the field of middle level education. Titles provide resources both for understanding and advancing various aspects of the middle school concept and for assisting classroom teachers in planning for instruction. More than seventy NMSA publications are available through the resource catalog as well as selected titles published by other organizations.

The association's highly acclaimed annual conference, which has drawn approximately 10,000 registrants in recent years, is held in the fall. NMSA also sponsors an annual urban education conference and a number of weekend workshops and institutes.

For information about NMSA and its many services contact the Headquarters at 4151 Executive Parkway, Suite 300, Westerville, Ohio, 43081. Telephone: 800-528-NMSA; Fax: 614-895-4750; WEB: www. nmsa.org.

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...I'm frustrated, but don't think blaming the kids is the answer. Something's wrong here, and its implications are far greater than the science fair and how we can change it. All of the symptoms I've outlined point to a lack of ownership on the students' part. We're selling, but they're not buying our product. At best, they're renting some answers for this or that test and then it's history, like an apartment they've outgrown. I guess I'm talking about student-centered learning, but on a higher level than we've achieved.

– from the November 30, 1998, entry

...If the stakes weren't so high, it would be rather amusing that we expect to effect change with so little opportunity to plan and refine our work.

– from the December 21, 1998, entry

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